

The Putin-Did-It Conspiracy Theory

Exclusive: A new truce agreement in Ukraine rekindles hope that the bloodshed can be reduced if not stopped, but Official Washington's gross misunderstanding of the crisis, blaming everything on Russia's President Putin, raises doubts and portends a potentially grave catastrophe, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The original falsehood behind the Iraq War was that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and intended to use them against America either directly or by giving them to al-Qaeda. The opening lie about the Ukraine crisis was that Russian President Vladimir Putin instigated the conflict as part of some Hitlerian plan to conquer much of Europe.

Yet, while the Hussein-WMD claim was hard for the common citizen to assess because it was supposedly supported by U.S. intelligence information that was kept secret, the Putin-Ukraine lie collapses under the most cursory examination based simply of what's publicly known and what makes sense.

Nevertheless, the New York Times much as it did when it was falsely reporting breathlessly about "aluminum tubes" for Iraq's non-existent nuclear weapons program continues to promote U.S. government propaganda about Ukraine as fact and dismisses any rational assessment of the situation as crazy.

On Friday, the Times concluded its lead editorial with the assertion that: "What remains incontrovertible is that Ukraine is Mr. Putin's war." But the point is anything but "incontrovertible." Indeed, the crisis was most certainly not instigated by Putin.

The actually "incontrovertible" facts about the Ukraine crisis are these: The destabilization of President Viktor Yanukovich's elected government began in November 2013 when Yanukovich balked at a proposed association agreement promoted by the European Union. He sought more time after the sticker shock of learning from Kiev economic experts that the deal would cost Ukraine \$160 billion in lost revenue by cutting trade with Russia.

It was German Chancellor Angela Merkel, not Vladimir Putin, who pushed the EU agreement and miscalculated the consequences, as the German newsmagazine Der Spiegel has reported. Putin's only role in that time frame was to offer a more generous \$15 billion aid package to Ukraine, not exactly a war-like act.

Yanukovich's decision to postpone action on the EU association prompted angry demonstrations in Kiev's Maidan square, largely from western Ukrainians who were

hoping for visa-free travel to the EU and other benefits from closer ties. Putin had no role in those protests and it's insane to think that he did.

In February 2014, the protests grew more and more violent as neo-Nazi and other militias organized in the western city of Lviv and these 100-man units known as "sotins" were dispatched daily to provide the muscle for the anti-Yanukovich uprising that was taking shape. It is frankly nutty to suggest that Putin was organizing these militias. [See Consortiumnews.com's "When Is a Putsch a Putsch."]

Evidence of Coup Plotting

By contrast, there is substantial evidence that senior U.S. officials were pushing for a "regime change" in Kiev, including an intercepted phone call and various public statements.

In December 2013, Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, a neocon holdover, reminded Ukrainian business leaders that the United States had invested \$5 billion in their "European aspirations." In early February, she discussed with U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt who the new leaders of Ukraine should be. "Yats is the guy," she declared, referring to Arseniy Yatsenyuk. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Who's Telling the Big Lie on Ukraine?"]

The Maidan uprising gained momentum on Feb. 20, 2014, when snipers around the square opened fire on police and protesters touching off a violent clash that left scores of people dead, both police and protesters. After the sniper fire and a police retreat – carrying their wounded – the demonstrators surged forward and some police apparently reacted with return fire of their own.

But the growing evidence indicates that the initial sniper fire originated from locations controlled by the Right Sektor, extremists associated with the Maidan's neo-Nazi "self-defense" commandant Andriy Parubiy. Though the current Ukrainian government has dragged its feet on an investigation, independent field reports, including a new one from BBC, indicate that the snipers were associated with the protesters, not the Yanukovich government as was widely reported in the U.S. media a year ago.

The worsening violence led Yanukovich to agree on Feb. 21 to a deal guaranteed by three European countries. He accepted reduced powers and agreed to early elections so he could be voted out of office. Yet, rather than permit that political settlement to go forward, neo-Nazis and other Maidan forces overran government buildings on Feb. 22, forcing Yanukovich and his officials to flee for their lives.

The U.S. State Department quickly deemed this coup regime "legitimate" and

Nuland's choice, Yatsenyuk, emerged as Prime Minister, with Parubiy put in charge of national security.

In other words, there is plenty of evidence that the Ukraine crisis was started by the EU through its mishandling of the association agreement, then was heated up by the U.S. government through the work of Nuland, Pyatt and other officials, and then was brought to a boil by neo-Nazis and other extremists who executed the coup.

A Nutty Conspiracy Theory

But there is zero evidence that Putin engineered these events. There is no evidence that he got Merkel and the EU to overplay their hand; no evidence that he organized the neo-Nazi militias in Lviv; no evidence that he manipulated U.S. officials to manipulate the "regime change" behind the scenes; no evidence that he ordered the Maidan militants to attack.

Is the New York Times really suggesting that Putin pulled the strings on the likes of Merkel and Nuland, secretly organized neo-Nazi brigades, and ruthlessly deployed these thugs to Kiev to provoke violence and overthrow Yanukovich, all while pretending to try to save Yanukovich's government all so Putin could advance some dastardly plot to conquer Europe?

The Times often makes fun of "conspiracy theorists," but the Times' narrative is something that would make even the most dedicated "conspiracy theorist" blush. Yet, the Times not only asserts this crazy conspiracy theory but calls it "incontrovertible."

Beyond the lack of evidence to support this conspiracy theory, there is no rational motive for Putin to have done what the Times claims that he did.

In the actual chronology of event, Putin was preoccupied with the Winter Olympics in Sochi when the Ukraine crisis took its turn for the worst a year ago. He was fearful that the Olympics would be marred by Chechen or other terrorism and thus was personally overseeing security.

Putin had spent some \$40 billion on making the Olympics a glamorous show to introduce the new Russia to the world as a country ready to join the West. I'm told that he was very proud of Russia's position in the G-8 and felt he had built a constructive relationship with President Barack Obama by helping him resolve crises in Syria and Iran in 2013.

The last thing Putin wanted to do was provoke a crisis in Ukraine. Nor is there any intelligence that he had designs on the Baltic States, as the conspiracy theory contends.

However, when a right-wing regime seized power in a violent coup in Ukraine on Russia's border and then took provocative actions against Ukraine's ethnic Russians, Putin responded to calls from Crimea both from its parliament and a referendum to take the peninsula back into Russia.

Putin also feared that the new powers in Kiev might give the historic Russian naval base at Sevastopol to NATO with its nuclear-armed submarines. In other words, as much as the New York Times has bandied about claims of a Russian "invasion" of Crimea, the Crimeans requested Russia's intervention and up to 25,000 Russian troops were already there in the agreement with Ukraine over the naval base.

Reactor, Not Instigator

But the key point is that Putin was reacting to the Ukraine crisis, not instigating it. As even former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger explained to Der Spiegel, "The annexation of Crimea was not a move toward global conquest. It was not Hitler moving into Czechoslovakia."

Kissinger added, "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."

In this case, Kissinger is clearly right. It never made any sense for Putin to provoke the Ukraine crisis. Yet, that became the lie upon which the United States has built its increasingly aggressive policies over the past year, with politicians of all stripes now shouting that America must stand up to the madman Putin and "Russian aggression."

This is a dangerous "group think" for a number of reasons, not the least the disturbing fact that both the United States and Russia have lots of nuclear weapons. On a less existential level, the "Putin-is-Hitler" analogy has prompted a major miscalculation on the right approach for the Obama administration to take vis a vis Putin.

As Harvard Professor Stephen M. Walt has noted, the most effective response to a crisis is different if a foreign leader is an aggressor on the march or if the leader feels cornered. The former calls for a "deterrence model," i.e., a tough reaction. But a tough response in the latter case will only make the beleaguered leader more belligerent like a cornered animal, thus spinning the crisis into more dangerous territory under what's known as the "spiral model."

"When insecurity is the taproot of a state's revisionist actions, making threats

just makes the situation worse,” Walt wrote. “When the ‘spiral model’ applies, the proper response is a diplomatic process of accommodation and appeasement (yes, appeasement) to allay the insecure state’s concerns.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“‘Realists’ Warn Against Ukraine Escalation.”](#)]

Perhaps the new ceasefire agreement in Minsk spearheaded by German Chancellor Merkel will finally help defuse the crisis, with the legitimate concerns of the various sides being taken into account rationally rather than letting the past year’s hysteria continue to control events.

But the Times’ editorial doesn’t give much reason for hope that America’s upside-down “group think” has righted itself in any meaningful way. In the mainstream media’s latest repeat of the Iraq-WMD fiasco, the Times and virtually every other major news outlet remain committed to a dangerous misreading of the facts about Ukraine.

And anyone who dares point out the real history of the crisis is immediately shouted down with the anti-intellectual riposte: “Putin apologist!” – just as in 2002-2003, when anyone who doubted the certainty about Iraq’s WMD was a “Saddam apologist.”

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](#)). 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](#).

A Vague War Declaration on ISIS

President Obama has tossed Congress a draft resolution on using force against Islamic State militants but the vague language is something of a hot potato that neither the White House nor Congress is comfortable with, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The draft that the Obama administration submitted to Congress to authorize the use of military force against ISIS (also called the Islamic State) seems to be pleasing almost no one, and that was bound to be. Some of the strongest early criticism is coming from doves, including people who support Mr. Obama on most

other issues, but hawks are complaining as well.

One can see why this tardy submission of a draft resolution was preceded by months of an Alphonse-and-Gaston routine in which both the administration and the Congress were looking to the other to offer a proposal first. Each seemed to sense it was impossible to come up with something that would not have unavoidable and easily noted flaws. Probably the draft will be modified in the course of the coming Congressional debate, and probably the modifications will still leave many doves and many hawks dissatisfied.

Several questions and potential problems are worthy of attention in the debate. Perhaps the most significant question concerns the fact that this draft does not repeal the authorization that Congress passed in 2001 shortly after the 9/11 attack, and that two administrations subsequently have used as the legal basis for a variety of armed actions in several different countries.

The current administration has been saying that this earlier resolution was all the authorization it needed for the military actions it already has been taking for months against ISIS. If the 2001 resolution, so interpreted, remains in force, then how can whatever limits are specified in a new resolution have any significance and any effect?

The coming debate in Congress, however overdue it is and however flawed will be whatever product comes out of it, is nonetheless welcome. It is part of a proper function of the legislative branch. This is not an instance, as has arisen on some other issues, of members trying to act like 535 secretaries of state and getting in the way of negotiating international agreements.

Nor is it, at least not yet, a case of members trying to act like 535 commanders-in-chief and interfering in the management of military operations. Instead it is a matter of the people's representatives setting basic policy and priorities when it comes to deciding whether a particular goal overseas merits expending American blood and treasure and putting American lives in harm's way.

Whatever its outcome in terms of a specific resolution, the debate might help to illuminate why it is so difficult to put into legislative language a precise statement of what is intended. The fundamental reason goes back to the habit of thinking of counterterrorism in military terms, as reflected in the unfortunate phrase "war on terror."

Terrorism is a tactic, not an enemy. Wars end; terrorism doesn't. Military measures are only one type of tool, and not necessarily the most effective one, in countering terrorism. Regarding that last point, it would be appropriate for members of Congress to debate not only the legal issues involved in an

authorization of force but also the practical and empirical issues pertaining to what is most likely to cause a group such as ISIS to wax or to wane.

Declaring war, or authorizing force, against a state involves a well-defined adversary, with the limits of the armed conflict defined by the activities of the target state. The organizational manifestations of international terrorism are much different, consisting of amoeba-like groups that shift shape and identity and that lack clear boundaries in terms of either structure or theaters of operation.

Terrorist groups, including the ones that have most preoccupied the United States in recent years, metamorphose, splinter, and spread. The names assumed by groups are of little use in adding clarity to this chaos, because adoption of a name sometimes is nothing more than an expression of fondness for a certain ideology or of admiration for what another group carrying that name has done, or an attempt to sound scarier, rather than reflecting any organizational cohesion.

This has been true of many who have adopted the al-Qaeda name as well as ones today adopting the ISIS name. This is why it is so hard to word a resolution authorizing force resolution against such groups, as if it could be done as clearly and precisely as declaring war against state X.

It is why there is justified concern about whether any meaningful limit is being applied by the current draft resolution when the stated target is ISIS “or associated persons or forces” and this is further declared to mean “any closely-related successor entity in hostilities against the United States or its coalition partners.” That is a very wide window.

It is good for Congress to try to come up with the least bad version of a resolution aimed at ISIS. But what is needed even more is a different kind of Congressional authorization, perhaps a much-improved version of the 2001 resolution, that recognizes that it might be appropriate in carefully selected times and places to apply the military tool in counterterrorism, without vainly pretending as if this could be done in the same way as declaring war against a particular state. But exactly what such an authorization would look like is not at all clear.

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Pressuring Obama toward More War

Still fearing of accusations about a lack of patriotism, Hollywood keeps making movies like “American Sniper” that ignore the criminality of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, an attitude that, in turn, makes it harder for President Obama to show restraint in foreign crises, notes Independent Institute’s Ivan Eland.

By Ivan Eland

As the American cable news entertainment channels focus on the artificial *American Sniper* controversy, the Obama administration’s issuance of its second and final national security strategy (the last one was done in 2010) was buried deep in the back pages of the newspapers.

Unfortunately, most Americans don’t choose to know much about U.S. foreign policy or American history, and therefore even the small minority that watches cable news or movies about such topics thinks they represent reality.

For example, Clint Eastwood, a Republican, uses his movie to helpfully rewrite history to confirm George W. Bush’s fantasy conflating pursuit of the 9/11 attackers with his unrelated and disastrous invasion of Iraq.

No matter that the heroically portrayed Chris Kyle, the sniper, is part of a U.S. force that invaded the country in violation of international law for no good reason and is killing an Iraqi insurgency – which is trying to fight off the foreign occupiers and their oppressive Shi’i government – that didn’t exist before the invasion. And Eastwood’s alternative reality, like leftist Oliver Stone’s similar blockbuster film fantasy some years ago about that liberal icon’s assassination, has a good chance of hardening in the public mind.

That’s because most Americans (unlike say Europeans), including U.S. policymakers, are ignorant of their own history, even recent history – and especially where foreign policy is concerned. And because they are foggy on this history or choose to ignore it, American policymakers have difficulty developing a coherent strategy for the United States.

Obama’s strategy fails this test too, but it at least recognizes the limitations of U.S. military power in remodeling countries around the world to American liking. In an introduction to the strategy, Obama writes: “America leads from a position of strength. But this does not mean we can or should attempt to dictate the trajectory of all unfolding events around the world. As powerful as we are and will remain, our resources and influence are not infinite. And in a complex world, many of the security problems we face do not lend themselves to quick and

easy fixes.”

Given the recent dumping of trillions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives (American and local) in losing wars (OK, I said it) in Afghanistan and Iraq and the current U.S.-induced or -aggravated chaos in Libya, Yemen, Somalia, and Pakistan, this statement should be obvious on its face.

It is apparently not to administration critics, such as the ubiquitous Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, and his sidekick Sen. Lindsay Graham, R-South Carolina, however, who berate Obama for running a weak foreign policy that is too reluctant to use American power.

When Susan Rice, Obama’s national security adviser, defended the new strategy by saying, “There is a lot going on. Still, while the dangers we face may be more numerous and varied, they are not of the existential nature we confronted during World War II or during the Cold War. We cannot afford to be buffeted by alarmism in a nearly instantaneous news cycle.” Again, this conclusion is seemingly obvious – reminiscent of the more restrained foreign policy of President Dwight Eisenhower during the 1950s. Eisenhower would deftly deflect foreign policy “crises” and sent U.S. forces into battle on only one curious occasion during his eight years in office – Lebanon in 1958. Ike was proud of the fact that no American service member lost a life during combat while he was president.

During his tenure, Eisenhower faced similar criticism that he was a “do-nothing” president, yet historians now correctly see that he was secretly on top of things and that he merely regarded doing nothing as doing something. Obama is less confident in his ability to resist pressure from the military and other vested interests for an interventionist American foreign policy, because he didn’t serve in the military and he didn’t defeat the Nazis, as did Ike.

So despite his laudably cautious nature (relatively speaking), Obama escalated the war in Afghanistan, was slow to get out of Iraq, got back into Iraq and now Syria, was goaded by the French into overthrowing Libya’s leader, and has escalated Bush’s drone wars in Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen – all in Islamic countries, thus continuing Bush’s documented fueling of resultant Islamist radicalism the world over.

Obama is now being pushed into providing arms for the Ukrainian government to battle Russian-backed Ukrainian separatists and putting more forces on the ground to fight the ISIS in the Middle East. He should avoid both of these options, because Ukraine is in the Russian sphere of influence, and ISIS is more of a threat to the Middle East region than it is to the United States.

If Obama wants a lasting legacy in foreign policy, he should be the first

president in the post-Cold War era (the elder George Bush and after) to create a coherent and sustainable national security strategy that deals with the current limited real threats to U.S. security and hedges against the future rising of China.

After the disastrous and costly wars, the great recession, and consequent accumulation of monstrous levels of national debt, the United States needs to work toward real economic renewal through cutting defense spending (which Obama and the Congress are currently toying with increasing) and slashing massive entitlement programs, such as Social Security, Medicare, etc. In the long-term, all indices of national power – including military expenditure – rest on a strong economy.

Thus, to reduce defense spending, the United States, in all regions of the world, should let regional powers take the lead unless a potentially catastrophic security crisis erupts – the crises in Ukraine and involving ISIS do not reach that level.

This “balancer-of-last-resort” strategy would save trillions of dollars, allow the renewal of American power well into the future, save American and foreign lives, and reduce Islamist radicalism worldwide and consequent blowback terrorism, thus making America more secure and less prone to curtail unique civil liberties.

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