

Ukraine War: A Reverse Cuban Missile Crisis

Guided by an aggressive neocon “regime change” strategy, the United States has stumbled into a potential military confrontation with Russia over Ukraine, a dangerous predicament that could become a Cuban Missile Crisis in reverse, as ex-U.S. diplomat William R. Polk explains.

By William R. Polk

In a rather ghastly Nineteenth Century experiment, a biologist by the name of Heinzmann found that if he placed a frog in boiling water, the frog immediately leapt out but that if he placed the frog in tepid water and then gradually heated it, the frog stayed put until he was scalded to death.

Are we like the frog? I see disturbing elements of that process today as we watch events unfold in the Ukraine confrontation. They profoundly frighten me and I believe they should frighten everyone. But they are so gradual that we do not see a specific moment in which we must jump or perish.

So here briefly, let me lay out the process of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and show how the process of that crisis compares with what we face today over the Ukraine.

Three elements stand out in the Cuban Missile Crisis: 1) Relations between the USSR and the U.S. were already “on the edge” before they reached the crisis stage; each of us had huge numbers of weapons of mass destruction aimed at the other. 2) The USSR precipitated the Crisis by advancing into Cuba, a country the U.S. had considered part of its “area of dominance” since the promulgation of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. 3) Some military and civilian officials and influential private citizens in both countries argued that the other side would “blink” if sufficient pressure was put on it.

Allow me to point out that I had a (very uncomfortable) ringside seat in the Crisis. I was one of three members of the “Crisis Management Committee” that oversaw the unfolding events.

On the Monday of the week of Oct. 22, 1962, I sat with Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Under Secretary George Ball, Counselor and Chairman of the Policy Planning Council Walt Rostow and Under Secretary for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson and listened to President John F. Kennedy’s speech to which we all had contributed.

The account Kennedy laid out was literally terrifying to those who understood

what a nuclear confrontation meant. Those of us in that room obviously did. We were each “cleared” for everything America then knew. And we each knew what our government was seeking – getting the Russian missiles out of Cuba. Finally, we were poised to do that by force if the Russians did not remove them.

Previous to that day, I had urged that we remove our “Jupiter” missiles from Turkey. This was important, I argued, because they were “offensive” rather than “defensive” weapons. The reason for this distinction was that they were obsolescent, liquid-fired rockets that required a relatively long time to fire; thus, they could only be used for a first strike. Otherwise they would be destroyed before they could be fired.

The Russians rightly regarded them as a threat. Getting them out enabled Chairman Nikita Khrushchev to remove the Russian missiles without suffering an unacceptable degree of humiliation and risking a coup d’État.

Then, following the end of the crisis, I wrote the “talking paper” for a review of the crisis, held at the Council on Foreign Relations, with all the involved senior U.S. officials in which we carefully reviewed the “lessons” of the crisis. What I write below in part derives from our consideration in that meeting. That is, it is essentially the consensus of those who were most deeply involved in the crisis.

War Gaming

Shortly thereafter, I participated in a Top Secret Department of Defense war game, designed by Professor Thomas Schelling of MIT in which he set out a scenario of a sequence of events – ironically placed near Ukraine – to show that the USSR would accept an American nuclear attack without responding.

It was, as he said, in our “post mortem” discussion of the game, a vindication of an extension of the theory of deterrence. It was to prove that we need not fear a reaction to a limited nuclear attack. Henry Kissinger had popularized this idea in his 1957 book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*. [Kissinger realized his mistake and partially repudiated what he had argued in a later, 1961, book, *The Necessity for Choice*.]

In the post mortem discussion of the Game, I argued and my military, intelligence and diplomatic colleagues on our war game team agreed with me that the idea of limited nuclear war was nonsense. No government could accept a devastating attack and survive. If it did not retaliate with a “victory-denying response,” it would be overthrown and executed by its own military and security forces.

And the original attacker would, in turn, have to avenge the retaliation or it

would face a similar fate. Tit for tat would lead inevitably to "general war."

Twenty years later, in 1983, a second Department of Defense war game (code named "Proud Prophet") in which I did not participate and which was heavily weighted to the military confirmed what I had argued in 1962: there was no such thing as a "limited" nuclear war if both sides were armed with nuclear weapons. Limited nuclear actions inevitably ended in all-out war.

So, to be realistic, forget "limited" war and consider general war.

Even the great advocate of thermonuclear weapons, Edward Teller, admitted that their use would "endanger the survival of man[kind]." The Russian nuclear scientist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Andrei Sakharov, laid out a view of the consequences in the Summer 1983 issue of *Foreign Affairs* as "a calamity of indescribable proportions."

Nuclear Consequences

More detail was assembled by a scientific study group convened by Carl Sagan and reviewed by 100 scientists. A graphic summary of their findings was published in the Winter 1983 issue of *Foreign Affairs*.

Sagan pointed out that since both major nuclear powers had targeted cities, casualties could reasonably be estimated at between "several hundred million to 1.1 billion people" with an additional 1.1 billion people seriously injured. Those figures related to the 1980s. Today, the cities have grown so the numbers would be far larger.

Massive fires set off by the bombs would carry soot into the atmosphere, causing temperatures to fall to a level that would freeze ground to a depth of about three feet. Planting crops would be impossible and such food as was stored would probably be contaminated so the few survivors would starve.

The hundreds of millions of bodies of the dead could not be buried and would spread contagion. As the soot settled and the sun again became again visible, the destruction of the ozone layer would remove the protection from ultraviolet rays and so promote the mutation of pyrotoxins.

Diseases against which there were no immunities would spread. These would overwhelm not only the human survivors but, in the opinion of the expert panel of 40 distinguished biologists, would cause "species extinction" among both plants and animals. Indeed, there was a distinct possibility that "there might be no human survivors in the Northern Hemisphere ... and the possibility of the extinction of *Homo sapiens*."

So to summarize:

–It is almost certain that neither the American nor the Russian government could accept even a limited attack without responding.

–There is no reason to believe that a Russian government, faced with defeat in conventional weapons, would be able to avoid using nuclear weapons.

–Whatever attempts are made to limit escalation are likely to fail and in failing lead to all out war.

–And, the predictable consequences of a nuclear war are indeed an unimaginable catastrophe.

These dangers, even if today they seem remote, clearly demand that we do everything we possibly can to avoid the fate of the frog. We can see that the “water” is beginning to heat up. We should not sit and wait for it to boil.

We did not do so in the Cuban Missile Crisis. We and the Russians worked out a solution. So what will we, what should we do now?

Realistic Thinking

The first step is to “appreciate” the situation as it actually is and to see clearly the flow and direction of events. Of course, they are not precisely the same as in the Cuban Missile Crisis. History does not exactly repeat itself, but, as Mark Twain has pithily said, subsequent events sometimes “rhyme” with those that went before.

Consider these key elements:

–Despite the implosion of the Soviet Union and the attempts to cut back on nuclear weapons, Russia and the United States remain parallel nuclear powers with each having the capacity to destroy the other – and probably the whole world. Hundreds if not thousands of our weapons apparently remain on “hair trigger alert.” I assume that theirs are similarly poised.

–Both Russia and the United States are governed by men who are unlikely to be able to accept humiliation and almost certain murder by “super patriots” in their own entourages and would be forced to act even at the cost of massive destruction to their countries.

So pressing the leadership of the opponent in this direction is literally playing with fire. As President Kennedy and the rest of us understood in the 1962 crisis, even if leaders want to avoid conflict, at a certain point in their mutual threats, events replace policy and leaders become bystanders.

–Both the Russian and American people have demonstrated their resilience and determination. Neither is apt to be open to intimidation.

–Both the Russians and the Americans are guided in their foreign policy by what they believe to be “core concerns.” For the Americans, as the Cuban Missile Crisis and many previous events illustrate, this comes down to the assertion of a “zone of exclusion” of outsiders.

America showed in the Cuban Missile Crisis that we would not tolerate, even at almost unimaginable danger, intrusion into our zone. Among the Russians, as their history illustrates, a similar code of action prevails. Having suffered, as fortunately we have not, horrifying costs of invasion throughout history but particularly in the Twentieth Century, the Russians can be expected to block, by any means and up to any cost, intrusions into their zone.

[I have laid out the Russian experience in a previous essay, “Shaping the Deep Memories of Russians and Ukrainians,” which is available on my website, www.williampolk.com]

–We said we understood this fundamental policy objective of the Russians, and officially on behalf of our government, Secretary of State James Baker Jr. agreed not to push our military activities into their sphere. We have, however, violated this agreement and have added country by constituent country of the former Soviet Union and its satellites to our military alliance, NATO.

–We are now at the final stage, just short of Russia itself in the Ukraine, and, as the Russians know, some influential Americans have suggested that we should push forward to “the gates of Moscow.” Those who advocate what the British once called a “Forward Policy,” now see the necessary first steps to be the arming of Ukraine.

–And finally, there is no way in which we or the European Union could arm Ukraine to a level that it could balance Russia. Thus, the weapons are likely both to give the Ukrainians unrealistic notions of what they can do vis-à-vis Russia and to be seen by the Russians as “offensive” moves to which they might feel compelled to respond. Consequently, they could lead us all into a war we do not want.

Policy Prescriptions

So what to do? In a word: stop. What we are now doing and what we contemplate doing is not in our interest or in the interests of the Ukrainians and is perceived as a threat by the Russians. We cannot deliver on the policy we would encourage the Ukrainians to adopt by arming them without a war. Economic sanctions are a form of that war, but they are unlikely to accomplish what we

have been proclaiming.

So, the logic of events could force the Russians and us to the next step and that step also to the next and so on. Our moves in this direction could cause massive death and destruction. We should stop doing what does not work and is not in our interests nor in the interests of either the Ukrainians or the Russians.

But stopping on what terms? Having myself helped to negotiate two complex but successful ceasefires, I have learned two things: first, a ceasefire cannot be obtained unless both parties see it as less bad than the alternative and, second, a ceasefire is merely a necessary precondition to a settlement. So what might a settlement involve?

The elements of a general settlement, I believe, are these:

–Russia will not tolerate Ukraine becoming a hostile member of a rival military pact. We should understand this. Think how we would have reacted had Mexico tried to join the Warsaw Pact. Far-fetched?

Consider that even before the issue of nuclear weapons arose, we tried to overthrow the pro-Russian Cuban government in the Bay of Pigs invasion and tried on several occasions to murder Cuban Head of State Fidel Castro. We failed; so for two generations we have sought to isolate, impoverish and weaken that regime.

We would be foolish to expect that the Russians will not react similarly when challenged by an anti-Russian Ukrainian government. Thus, to press for inclusion of Ukraine into NATO is not only self-defeating; it risks overturning a generation of cautious moves to improve our security and increase our well-being and is pointing us toward at least a cold if not a hot war. We need to adopt a different course.

–We must recognize that the Ukraine is not part of our sphere of influence or dominance. It is neither in the Western Hemisphere nor in the North Atlantic. On the Black Sea, the concept of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization is an oxymoron. The Black Sea area is part of what the Russians call “the near abroad.”

The policy implications are clear: Just as the Russians realized that Cuba was part of our sphere of dominance and so backed down in the Missile Crisis, they will probably set their response to our actions on the belief that we will similarly back down because of our realization that Ukraine is in their neighborhood and not in ours.

The danger, of course, is that, for domestic political reasons and particularly because of the urging of the neoconservatives and other hawks we may not accept this geostrategic fact. Then, conflict, with all the horror that could mean, would become virtually inevitable.

–But conflict is not inevitable and can fairly easily be avoided if we wish to avoid it. This is because the Russians and Ukrainians share an objective which the United States also emotionally shares. The shared objective is that Ukraine become a secure, prosperous and constructive member of the world community.

Becoming such a member can be accomplished only by the Ukrainians themselves. But as all qualified observers have seen, Ukrainian society and political organization have far to go to reach our joint objective.

This is true regardless of the Russian-American dispute. Its government is corrupt, tyrannical and weak. The best we can do is to remove outside deterrents to the growth of a healthy, secure and free society.

The way to do this is two-fold: first we need to stop our military intrusion into Ukrainian-Russian affairs, so diminishing Russian fears of aggression, and, second, wherever possible and in whatever ways are acceptable to both parties to assist the growth of the Ukrainian economy and, indirectly, the stability and sanity of the Ukrainian governing system. A first step in this direction could be for Ukraine to join the European Union.

This, in general terms, should be and for our own sakes must be, our strategy.

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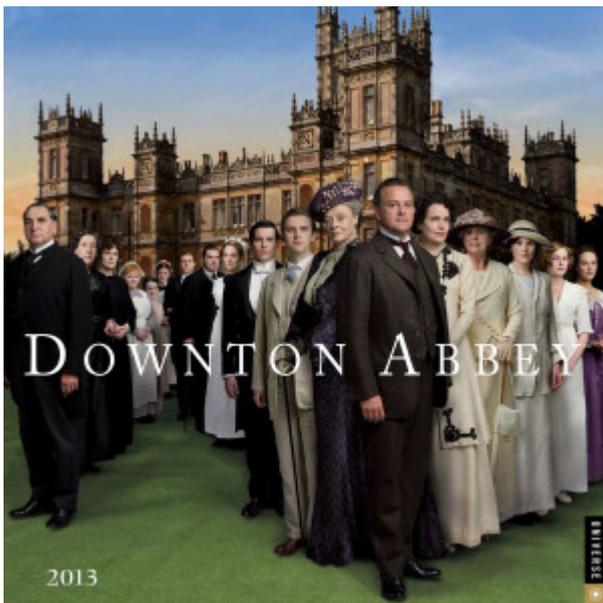
A 'Downton Abbey' World of US Politics

U.S. pundits and pols often lecture other countries for their lapses in democracy, sometimes citing barriers that some candidates may face to get on the ballot. But American politics has its own major barrier, the need to raise lots and lots of money, as Michael Winship notes.

By Michael Winship

We could go on about the inherent contradiction of “Downton Abbey” as the biggest hit on public television that a series about a fading, genteel (and Gentile) British aristocracy and its servants dominates the schedule of a broadcasting service mandated to promote diversity and give a voice to the underrepresented. And sometime soon, we will talk about precisely that and more.

And we could go on at length about the Downton fantasy vs. reality ratio, the series “polishing up history to make the class divide less savage,” as British journalist Polly Toynbee pointed out when the show’s current season began.



“What we never see,” she wrote in *The Guardian*, “is bedraggled drudges rising in freezing shared attics at 5:30 a.m.; slopping out chamber pots, heaving coal, black-leading grates, hauling cans of hot water with hands already made raw by chilblains and caustic soda. We never dwell on the hardship of scrubbing floors, or scrubbing clothes, or scouring grease; in pre-detergent days, they were up to their elbows all day long.”

But for now, let’s talk instead about Congressman Aaron Schock, Republican from Illinois. You’ve heard about how his interior decorator pal, proprietor of a company called Euro Trash, redecorated Schock’s new Capitol Hill office in high “Downton Abbey” style which is more than somewhat ironic because, as Josh Israel at ThinkProgress pointed out, “Schock has repeatedly voted against federal funding for public broadcasting, voting to defund National Public Radio and for a Paul Ryan budget that zeroed out all funds for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.”

But even more important, Schock’s expensive tastes and how he spends money to

make money for his party tells a sad story of the state of Congress and campaign fundraising.

It has been three weeks or so since Washington Post reporter Ben Terris stumbled onto Schock's mini-manor: "Bright red walls. A gold-colored wall sconce with black candles. A Federal-style bull's-eye mirror with an eagle perched on top." And that was merely the reception area.

Schock's inner sanctum was: "another dramatic red room. This one with a drippy crystal chandelier, a table propped up by two eagles, a bust of Abraham Lincoln and massive arrangements of pheasant feathers."

Schock's communications director, Benjamin Cole, just about collapsed from the vapors when he found out a reporter had slipped past the velvet ropes ("You've got a member [of Congress] willing to talk to you about other things," he complained. "Why sour it by rushing to write some gossipy piece?")

Within days, Cole was gone, due not to the Downton dustup but for making stupid racist comments on Facebook that he apparently thought were amusing. As Violet Crawley, the dowager countess, would say, "Vulgarity is no substitute for wit." (Yes, we confess, "Downton Abbey" is a guilty pleasure for us, too)

In truth, Schock's office looks more like a cut-rate version of the infamous Red Room in *50 Shades of Grey* than the height of inherited, entitled elegance. House members pay for such renovations and furniture from a taxpayer-funded account that also covers staff and official travel.

For example, according to *USA Today*, after Rep. Schock was first elected, during a period from December 2009 into the first part of 2010, the congressman spent nearly \$120,000 on furniture and renovations, including hardwood floors, "high-end countertops" and painting.

The Euro Trash decorator friend said she had offered her current professional services for free, although the nonpartisan Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) notes that in 2012, Rep. Schock's campaign paid \$5,522 to her company for "office equipment."

Within a day or so of the *Post* story, Rep. Schock announced he would be paying her for her work as well as the various new furnishings, which presumably include the pheasant feathers. House rules prevent taking for free anything worth \$50 or more, "gifts of services, training, transportation, lodging, and meals, whether provided in kind, by purchase of a ticket, payment in advance, or reimbursement after the expense has been incurred."

This isn't the first time Congressman Schock's financial dealings have come

under scrutiny. The congressional newspaper Roll Call notes, “The House Ethics Committee still has a referral” from March 2012, stemming “from an Office of Congressional Ethics investigation that found he may have improperly solicited contributions for an anti-incumbent super PAC.”

And recently, the progressive website *Blue Nation Review* reported, “The month before the 2012 elections, Congressman Schock sold his house to a major Republican donor who was also one of his campaign supporters for a price that appears to far exceed the market value at the time.”

The donor was a vice president at the construction equipment company Caterpillar Inc., which in last year’s midterm elections was Schock’s second biggest campaign contributor.

Come to think of it, Schock’s new office decor puts us more in mind of a bordello, if it was decorated by Pee Wee Herman. Which might be the more apt metaphor for Congress these days. Although the transfer of cash isn’t supposed to take place on the premises, members are doing very well with their outcall services, whether they’re Republicans or Democrats.

As Ken Silverstein recently wrote at *The Intercept*, we now have “a political consensus that churns out business-friendly policies no matter which party is in power”

“One of the reasons that government works well for the wealthy is that so many elected officials are wealthy themselves, and directly benefit from the economic measures they pass. The median net worth of the current Congress is slightly north of \$1 million, according to the Center for Responsive Politics [CRP], and that surely understates their wealth because it’s based on financial disclosure forms that don’t require the listing of real estate holdings.”

CRP estimates Schock’s net worth, as of 2013, at \$1,398,695, right at that median sweet spot. Promoting his image as one of the younger members of Congress (he’s now 33), Rep. Schock likes to feature pictures of himself surfing, snowboarding and hang gliding at various beautiful locations (he often hires a personal photographer).

But this isn’t just about publicity for his admirably toned physique. Schock is all about raising money for his party and fellow Republican members and to pull in that kind of cash perceived wisdom says you have to spend a bundle to attract it. That translates into lots of trips, expensive meals, private jets and time in lavish hotels and resorts. It’s a burden but someone has to do it.

Politico reports, “In Aspen, Colorado, [Schock] stays at the Little Nell, a five-star resort near the ski slopes. In Las Vegas, he prefers the pricey Wynn

hotel. While in Vail, Colorado, and San Francisco, it's the Four Seasons. In Miami Beach, he's sampled the Delano, Fontainebleau and the exclusive Soho Beach House. And in Beverly Hills, California, he's tried both the Peninsula and the Beverly Wilshire."

It's also about providing playtime for deep-pocketed contributors. Again, according to *Politico*, "Schock is constantly fundraising, and he has repeatedly attended high-profile events. On Jan. 31, 2014, Schock cut a check to the NFL for more than \$10,000 to cover the cost of Super Bowl tickets. In April 2013, Schock spent \$3,320 on tickets to the CMA Country Music Awards. Instead of holding fundraisers at golf courses – as dozens of other Republicans do – Schock insiders say he prefers sporting and music events."

And you wonder why so little attention is paid to the poor and middle class?

Like one of the characters from "Downton Abbey," Aaron Schock has made quite a climb, from public servant downstairs to pampered upstairs aristocrat. Meanwhile, when he's not jetting to and fro, raising and spending cash, perhaps Congressman Aaron Schock can dream up new ways of raking in money – and spending it – as he sits in his ornate new office.

What next? With the pope speaking before Congress in September, how about selling indulgences to corporate fat cats and turning the congressman's workspace into a modest replica of the Sistine Chapel? That might be just the thing.

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The State Department's 'Twilight Zone'

The gap between reality and what the U.S. government says is reality has widened into a chasm with the mainstream U.S. news media usually nodding at whatever absurdity is presented, but the AP's Matthew Lee is one of the few reporters who challenges the State Department's "Twilight Zone," as William Blum notes.

By William Blum

"You are traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind. A journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination. Your next stop the Twilight Zone." (American Television series,

1959-1965)

U.S. State Department Daily Press Briefing, Feb. 13, 2015. Department Spokesperson Jen Psaki, questioned by Matthew Lee of The Associated Press.

Lee: President Maduro [of Venezuela] last night went on the air and said that they had arrested multiple people who were allegedly behind a coup that was backed by the United States. What is your response?

Psaki: These latest accusations, like all previous such accusations, are ludicrous. As a matter of longstanding policy, the United States does not support political transitions by non-constitutional means. Political transitions must be democratic, constitutional, peaceful, and legal. We have seen many times that the Venezuelan Government tries to distract from its own actions by blaming the United States or other members of the international community for events inside Venezuela. These efforts reflect a lack of seriousness on the part of the Venezuelan Government to deal with the grave situation it faces.

Lee: Sorry. The U.S. has whoa, whoa, whoa the U.S. has a longstanding practice of not promoting what did you say? How longstanding is that? I would in particular in South and Latin America, that is not a longstanding practice.

Psaki: Well, my point here, Matt, without getting into history

Lee: Not in this case.

Psaki: is that we do not support, we have no involvement with, and these are ludicrous accusations.

Lee: In this specific case.

Psaki: Correct.

Lee: But if you go back not that long ago, during your lifetime, even (laughter)

Psaki: The last 21 years. (Laughter.)

Lee: Well done. Touché. But I mean, does “longstanding” mean 10 years in this case? I mean, what is

Psaki: Matt, my intention was to speak to the specific reports.

Lee: I understand, but you said it’s a longstanding US practice, and I’m not so sure it depends on what your definition of “longstanding” is.

Psaki: We will okay.

Lee: Recently in Kyiv, whatever we say about Ukraine, whatever, the change of government at the beginning of last year was unconstitutional, and you supported it. The constitution was

Psaki: That is also ludicrous, I would say.

Lee: not observed.

Psaki: That is not accurate, nor is it with the history of the facts that happened at the time.

Lee: The history of the facts. How was it constitutional?

Psaki: Well, I don't think I need to go through the history here, but since you gave me the opportunity – as you know, the former leader of Ukraine left of his own accord.

Leaving the Twilight Zone: The former Ukrainian leader ran for his life from those who had staged the coup, including a mob of vicious U.S.-supported neo-Nazis.

If you know how to contact Ms. Psaki, tell her to have a look at my list of more than 50 governments the United States has attempted to overthrow since the end of the Second World War. None of the attempts were democratic, constitutional, peaceful, or legal; well, a few were non-violent.

William Blum is an author, historian, and renowned critic of U.S. foreign policy. He is the author of Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II and Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower, among others. [This article originally appeared at the Anti-Empire Report, <http://williamblum.org/> .]
