

# Playing Chicken with Nuclear War

**Exclusive:** U.S.-Russian tensions keep escalating now surrounding the murder of Russian opposition figure Boris Nemtsov yet almost no one on the American side seems to worry about the possibility that the tough-guy rhetoric and proxy war in Ukraine might risk a nuclear conflagration, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry (Updated with Washington Post editorial on March 3.)

The United States and Russia still maintain vast nuclear arsenals of mutual assured destruction, putting the future of humanity in jeopardy every instant. But an unnerving nonchalance has settled over the American side which has become so casual about the risk of cataclysmic war that the West's propaganda and passions now ignore Russian fears and sensitivities.

A swaggering goofiness has come to dominate how the United States reacts to Russia, with American politicians and journalists dashing off tweets and op-eds, rushing to judgment about the perfidy of Moscow's leaders, blaming them for almost anything and everything.

These days, playing with nuclear fire is seen as a sign of seriousness and courage. Anyone who urges caution and suggests there might be two sides to the U.S.-Russia story is dismissed as a wimp or a stooge. A what-me-worry "group think" has taken hold across the U.S. ideological spectrum. Fretting about nuclear annihilation is so 1960s.

So, immediately after last Friday night's murder of Russian opposition figure Boris Nemtsov, the West's media began insinuating that Russian President Vladimir Putin was somehow responsible even though there was no evidence or logic connecting him to the shooting, just 100 meters from the Kremlin, probably the last place Russian authorities would pick for a hit.

But that didn't stop the mainstream U.S. news media from casting blame on Putin. For instance, the New York Times published [an op-ed](#) by anti-Putin author Martha Gessen saying: "The scariest thing about the murder of Boris Nemtsov is that he himself did not scare anyone," suggesting that his very irrelevance was part of a sinister political message.

Though no one outside the actual killers seems to know yet why Nemtsov was gunned down, Gessen took the case several steps further explaining how while Putin probably didn't finger Nemtsov for death the Russian president was somehow still responsible. She wrote:

"In all likelihood no one in the Kremlin actually ordered the killing, and this

is part of the reason Mr. Nemtsov's murder marks the beginning of yet another new and frightening period in Russian history. The Kremlin has recently created a loose army of avengers who believe they are acting in the country's best interests, without receiving any explicit instructions. Despite his lack of political clout, Mr. Nemtsov was a logical first target for this menacing force."

So, rather than wait for actual evidence to emerge, the Times published Gessen's conclusions and then let her spin off some even more speculative interpretations. Yet, basing speculation upon speculation is almost always a bad idea, assuming you care about fairness and accuracy.

Remember how after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, some terrorism "experts" not only jumped to the false conclusion that the attack was a case of Islamic terrorism but that Oklahoma was chosen to send a message to Americans that no part of the country was safe. But the terrorist turned out to be a white right-wing extremist lashing out at the federal government.

While surely hard-line Russian nationalists, who resented Nemtsov's support for the U.S.-backed Ukrainian regime in Kiev, should be included on a list of early suspects, there are a number of other possibilities that investigators must also consider, including business enemies, jealous rivals and even adversaries within Russia's splintered opposition though that last one has become a target of particular ridicule in the West.

Yet, during my years at the Associated Press, one of my articles was about a CIA "psychological operations" manual which an agency contractor prepared for the Nicaraguan Contra rebels noting the value of assassinating someone on your own side to create a "martyr" for the cause. I'm in no way suggesting that such a motive was in play regarding Nemtsov's slaying but it's not as if this idea is entirely preposterous either.

My point is that even in this age of Twitter when everyone wants to broadcast his or her personal speculation about whodunit to every mystery, it would be wise for news organizations to resist the temptation. Surely, if parallel circumstances occurred inside the United States, such guess work would be rightly dismissed as "conspiracy theory."

### **Nuclear Mischief**

Plus, this latest rush to judgment isn't about some relatively innocuous topic like, say, how some footballs ended up under-inflated in an NFL game this situation involves how the United States will deal with Russia, which possesses some 8,000 nuclear warheads – roughly the same size as the U.S. arsenal – while

the two countries have around 1,800 missiles on high-alert, i.e., ready to launch at nearly a moment's notice.

Over the weekend, I participated in a conference on nuclear dangers sponsored by the Helen Caldicott Foundation in New York City. On my Saturday afternoon panel was Seth Baum of the Global Catastrophic Risk Institute who offered a sobering look at how the percentage chances of a nuclear war though perhaps low at any given moment add up over time to quite likely if not inevitable. He made the additional observation that those doomsday odds rise at times of high tensions between the United States and Russia.

As Baum noted, at such crisis moments, the people responsible for the U.S. and Russian nuclear weapons are more likely to read a possible computer glitch or some other false alarm as a genuine launch and are thus more likely to push their own nuclear button.

In other words, it makes good sense to avoid a replay of the Cuban Missile Crisis in reverse by edging U.S. nuclear weapons up against Russia's borders, especially when U.S. politicians and commentators are engaging in Cold War-style Russia-bashing. Baiting the Russian bear may seem like great fun to the tough-talking politicians in Washington or the editors of the New York Times and Washington Post but this hostile rhetoric could be taken more seriously in Moscow.

When I spoke to the nuclear conference, I noted how the U.S. media/political system had helped create just that sort of crisis in Ukraine, with every "important" person jumping in on the side of the Kiev coup-makers in February 2014 when they overthrew elected President Viktor Yanukovich.

Since then, nearly every detail of that conflict has been seen through the prism of "our side good/their side bad." Facts that put "our side" in a negative light, such as the key role played by neo-Nazis and the Kiev regime's brutal "anti-terrorism operation," are downplayed or ignored.

Conversely, anything that makes the Ukrainians who are resisting Kiev's authority look bad gets hyped and even invented, such as one New York Times' lead story citing photos that supposedly proved Russian military involvement but quickly turned out to be fraudulent. [See Consortiumnews.com's "NYT Retracts Russian Photo Scoop."]

At pivotal moments in the crisis, such as the Feb. 20, 2014 sniper fire that killed both police and protesters and the July 17, 2014 shoot-down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 killing 298 passengers and crew, the U.S. political/media establishment has immediately pinned the blame on Yanukovich, the ethnic Russian

rebels who are resisting his ouster, or Putin.

Then, when evidence emerged going in the opposite direction – toward “our side” – a studied silence followed, allowing the earlier propaganda to stay in place as part of the preferred storyline. [See, for instance, Consortiumnews.com’s [“President Gollum’s ‘Precious’ Secrets.”](#)]

### **A Pedestrian Dispute**

One of the points of my talk was that the Ukrainian crisis emerged from a fairly pedestrian dispute, i.e., plans for expanding economic ties with the European Union while not destroying the historic business relationship with Russia. In November 2013, Yanukovich backed away from signing an EU association agreement when experts in Kiev announced that it would blow a \$160 billion hole in Ukraine’s economy. He asked for more time.

But Yanukovich’s decision disappointed many western Ukrainians who favored the EU agreement. Tens of thousands poured into Kiev’s Maidan square to protest. The demonstrations then were seized upon by far-right Ukrainian political forces who have long detested the country’s ethnic Russians in the east and began dispatching organized “sotins” of 100 fighters each to begin firebombing police and seizing government buildings.

As the violence grew worse, U.S. neoconservatives also saw an opportunity, including Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, who told the protesters the United States was on their side, and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who passed out cookies to the protesters and plotted with U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt on who would become the new leaders of Ukraine. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“NYT Still Pretends No Coup in Ukraine.”](#)]

Thus, a very manageable political problem in Ukraine was allowed to expand into a proxy war between nuclear-armed United States and Russia. Added to it were intense passions and extensive propaganda. In the West, the Ukraine crisis was presented as a morality play of people who “share our values” pitted against conniving Russians and their Hitler-like president Putin.

In Official Washington, anyone who dared suggest compromise was dismissed as a modern-day Neville Chamberlain practicing “appeasement.” Everyone “serious” was set on stopping Putin now by shipping sophisticated weapons to the Ukrainian government so it could do battle against “Russian aggression.”

The war fever was such that no one raised an eyebrow when Ukraine’s Deputy Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko told [Canada’s CBC Radio](#) last month that the West should no longer fear fighting nuclear-armed Russia and that Ukraine wanted arms for a “full-scale war” against Moscow.

“Everybody is afraid of fighting with a nuclear state. We are not anymore, in Ukraine,” Prystaiko said. “However dangerous it sounds, we have to stop [Putin] somehow. For the sake of the Russian nation as well, not just for the Ukrainians and Europe. What we expect from the world is that the world will stiffen up in the spine a little.” [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Ready for Nuclear War over Ukraine?”](#)]

Instead of condemning Prystaiko’s recklessness, more U.S. officials began lining up in support of sending lethal military hardware to Ukraine so it could fight Russia, including Director of National Intelligence James Clapper who said he [favored the idea](#) though it might provoke a “negative reaction” from Moscow.

### **Russian Regime Change**

Even President Barack Obama and other U.S. leaders who have yet to publicly endorse arming the Kiev coup-makers enjoy boasting about how much pain they are inflicting on the Russian economy and its government. In effect, there is a U.S. strategy of making the Russian economy “scream,” a first step toward a larger neocon goal to achieve “regime change” in Moscow.

Another point I made in my talk on Saturday was how the neocons are good at drafting “regime change” plans that sound great when discussed at a think tank or outlined on an op-ed page but often fail to survive in the real world, such as their 2003 plan for a smooth transition in Iraq to replace Saddam Hussein with someone of their choosing except that it didn’t work out that way.

Perhaps the greatest danger from the new neocon dream for “regime change” in Moscow is that whoever follows Putin might not be the pliable yes man that the neocons envision, but a fierce Russian nationalist who would suddenly have control of their nuclear launch codes and might decide that it’s time for the United States to make concessions or face annihilation.

On March 3, the Washington Post’s neocon editorialists emphasized the need for ousting Putin as they [praised Nemtsov](#) and other anti-Putin activists who have urged an escalation of Western pressure on Russia. The Post wrote: “They say he [Putin] can be stopped only by steps that decisively raise the cost of his military aggression and cripple the financial system that sustains his regime.”

The Post then added its own suggestion that Putin was behind Nemtsov’s murder and its own hope that Putin might be soon be removed, saying: “It’s not known who murdered Mr. Nemtsov, and it probably won’t be as long as Mr. Putin remains in power.”

Yet, what I find truly remarkable about the Ukraine crisis is that it was always relatively simple to resolve: Before the coup, Yanukovich agreed to reduced

powers and early elections so he could be voted out of office. Then, either he or some new leadership could have crafted an economic arrangement that expanded ties to the EU while not severing them with Russia.

Even after the coup, the new regime could have negotiated a federalized system that granted more independence to the disenfranchised ethnic Russians of eastern Ukraine, rather than launch a brutal “anti-terrorist operation” against those resisting the new authorities. But Official Washington’s “group think” has been single-minded: only bellicose anti-Russian sentiments are permitted and no suggestions of accommodation are allowed.

Still, spending time this weekend with people like Helen Caldicott, an Australian physician who has committed much of her life to campaigning against nuclear weapons, reminded me that this devil-may-care attitude toward a showdown with Russia, which has gripped the U.S. political/media establishment, is not universal. Not everyone agrees with Official Washington’s nonchalance about playing a tough-guy game of nuclear chicken.

As part of the conference, Caldicott asked attendees to stay around for a late-afternoon showing of the 1959 movie, “On the Beach,” which tells the story of the last survivors from a nuclear war as they prepare to die when the radioactive cloud that has eliminated life everywhere else finally reaches Australia. A mystery in the movie is how the final war began, who started it and why with the best guess being that some radar operator somewhere thought he saw something and someone reacted in haste.

Watching the movie reminded me that there was a time when Americans were serious about the existential threat from U.S.-Russian nuclear weapons, when there were films like “Dr. Strangelove,” “Fail Safe,” and “On the Beach.” Now, there’s a cavalier disinterest in those risks, a self-confidence that one can put his or her political or journalistic career first and just assume that some adult will step in before the worst happens.

Whether some adults show up to resolve the Ukraine crisis remains to be seen. It’s also unclear if U.S. pundits and pols can restrain themselves from more rushes to judgment, as in the case of Boris Nemtsov. But a first step might be for the New York Times and other “serious” news organizations to return to traditional standards of journalism and check out the facts before jumping to a conclusion.

**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**

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