

More Anti-Russian Bias at the NYT

Exclusive: The anti-Russian bias of the New York Times is hard to miss as it consistently puts Moscow's actions and intentions in the worst possible light, in stark contrast to the warm glow that usually surrounds military actions by the U.S. and its "allies," as Jonathan Marshall observes.

By Jonathan Marshall

Someone at the *New York Times* forgot where the opinion pages are, and not for the first time. When it comes to hot-button foreign issues such as Russia and Syria, too often Official Washington's opinions and hostile spin get propagated as fact on its news pages.

Consider the Sept. 30 edition of the Times and its contrasting coverage of U.S. bombing in Afghanistan and Russian bombing in Syria. On Afghanistan, the paper's approach is factual: The Times story leads with "American warplanes bombarded Taliban-held territory around the Kunduz airport overnight, and Afghan officials said American Special Forces were rushed toward the fighting." Lacking much depth, the article does not address, much less question, U.S. motives, which by implication are simply to help beleaguered government forces resist Taliban advances in Kunduz and northern Afghanistan.

In contrast, the main Times story on Russia's first bombing raids in Syria leads with an assumption of Russian motives related as fact: "President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia suddenly escalated the stakes in his contest with the West over influence in the Middle East on Wednesday, as Russian pilots carried out their first airstrikes in Syria." Not until the fourth paragraph do we find that Moscow claims that its goal is to "fight Islamic State militants."

Later in the story, the *Times'* Moscow correspondent Neil MacFarquhar omnisciently insists instead that Putin's real motives for "interfering" (love that spin!) in Syria are to "restore Russian influence as a global power," "force an end to the diplomatic and financial isolation the West imposed after Moscow seized Crimea," "maintain control over Russia's naval station at Tartus, in Syria," and "draw attention away from the Ukraine conflict and the troubles it has caused." In other words, the Russian bear is big, bad, and on the move.

By the fifth paragraph of the story, MacFarquhar has looked into his crystal ball and confidently predicts that "Russia's intervention will most likely prolong and complicate the war, as it could keep Mr. Assad in office and adds Russia to the already complicated patchwork of forces deployed there."

In case you don't believe his message, an accompanying "news" story, by Helene

Cooper and the reliably hawkish national security correspondent Michael Gordon, insists that Russia's ominous "military buildup in Syria" (consisting of just 32 tactical jets) "could further inflame, and lengthen, the conflict" by "frustrating already-dwindling hopes for a diplomatic resolution." Their sources range all the way from current U.S. and Saudi officials to former U.S. officials and an expert at the hawkish Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Of course, Russia's stepped-up intervention could prolong the conflict by preventing an Islamist victory. Left unsaid is that Russia's support for Assad could just as easily shorten the conflict by bringing some non-jihadist opposition groups to the bargaining table to work out a power-sharing government with Assad, which they have hitherto resisted. Contrary to the *Times'* spin, no one knows.

The fact that two *Times* stories on the same day draw the most dire conclusion stands in contrast to the paper's more even-handed assessment in July of stepped up U.S. bombing in Afghanistan: "The airstrikes could undermine the Taliban's willingness to negotiate with the Afghan government and could indirectly strengthen the group's legitimacy to an Afghan public that widely loathes the American airstrikes. Or, the airstrikes might give the Afghan government more leverage in negotiations."

On Wednesday, Cooper and Gordon make much of the fact that confronting the Islamic State "is not necessarily Moscow's priority," as evidenced by the fact that "the very first warplanes that Russia sent to Latakia were four SU-30 Flanker air-to-air fighters. Such aircraft, officials said, would be useful in expanding Russia's military reach in the Middle East and perhaps in dissuading foes of Mr. Assad from even contemplating the establishment of a no-fly zone over Syria. But they have little utility against a ground force like the Islamic State."

Those unnamed "officials" apparently didn't read Secretary of State John Kerry's Sept. 22 news conference, at which he said "it is the judgment of our military and most experts that the level and type [of Soviet deployment] represents basically force protection, a level of protection for their deployment to an air base, given the fact that it is in an area of conflict."

Funny thing, when the U.S. moved forces into a Turkish air base this summer, a Pentagon spokesman quoted by *Military Times* said the U.S. military's first priorities were "force protection and things like that." Nobody at the *Times* cited anonymous sources who found that suspicious.

Cooper and Gordon also offer no balancing perspective from Moscow. A spokeswoman for Russia's Foreign Ministry explained earlier this month that "Russian

military specialists help Syrians master Russian hardware, and we can't understand the anti-Russian hysteria about this. We have been supplying Syria with arms and military equipment for a long time. We are doing this in accordance with existing contracts and in full accordance with international law."

As Putin noted in his United Nations address, Russia is aiding the internationally recognized regime in Damascus, unlike illegal intervention by the U.S., Gulf states, France and other countries on behalf of various Islamist rebels.

So what we're left with is familiar Cold War imagery of a Russian bear on the move to set the world aflame, presumably unlike humanitarian U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, Syria, Libya (and, going back a few years more, Iraq, Serbia, Panama, etc.).

I, for one, still respect the *New York Times* as our country's, and perhaps the world's, single best news source on a wide variety of topics. That's why I feel betrayed when it lets down the profession's best standards by internalizing Official Washington's group think as "news" rather than opinion or spin.

Jonathan Marshall is an independent researcher living in San Anselmo, California. Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were "[Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions](#)"; "[Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran](#)"; "[Saudi Cash Wins France's Favor](#)"; "[The Saudis' Hurt Feelings](#)"; "[Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Bluster](#)"; "[The US Hand in the Syrian Mess](#)"; and "[Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War](#)."]
