

A Russian Diplomat's Take on the World

As the West's mainstream media portrays Russia as a crazy rogue state, Moscow's thoughtful critiques of world affairs are ignored, not fitting the propaganda theme. Such was the case when Foreign Minister Lavrov explained why there would be no more "business as usual" with the West, as Gilbert Doctorow describes.

By Gilbert Doctorow

On Jan. 26, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held an important year-in-review press conference before an audience of about 150 journalists, including the BBC correspondent Steve Rosenberg and many other well-known representatives of mainstream Western media. The purpose of this annual event is to look back at issues faced by his Ministry over the past year and to give his appraisal of results achieved.

Lavrov's opening remarks were concise, lasting perhaps 15 minutes, and the remaining two hours were turned over to the floor for questions. As the microphone was passed to journalists from many different countries, the discussion covered a great variety of subjects, including the likelihood of a new "re-set" with the United States, the negotiations over re-convening the Syrian peace talks in Geneva, British Prime Minister David Cameron's comments on the findings of a U.K. public inquest into the Litvinenko murder, the possibilities for reestablishing diplomatic relations with Georgia, and prospects for resolving conflicting claims over the Southern Kurile islands so as to conclude a peace treaty with Japan.

To the best of my knowledge, not a single report of the event has yet appeared on major online American, French, British and German newspaper portals or television channels. This was not for lack of substance or newsworthy sound bites, including Lavrov's headline comment that he agreed with Western leaders who said there would be "no business as usual" between Russia and the West.

As part of his opening comments, Lavrov said, "Our Western colleagues sometimes declare with passion that there can no longer be 'business as usual with Russia.' I am convinced that this is so and here we agree: there will be no more 'business as usual' when they tried to bind us with agreements which take into account above all the interests of either the European Union or the United States and they wanted to persuade us that this will do no harm to our interests. That history is over and done with. A new stage of history is dawning which can develop only on the basis of equal rights and all other principles of international law."

Regarding a similar news blackout that followed another major Russian press briefing, the sharp-tongued Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova commented, what are all these accredited Western reporters doing in Moscow if nothing gets published abroad? Do they have some other occupation?

In keeping with custom, the Russian Foreign Ministry posted the entire [video](#) recording of Lavrov's press conference on youtube.com and posted transcripts in Russian and English on the [www.mid.ru](#) site. The Russian version takes up 26 tightly spaced printed pages. This is what I have used, since I prefer to go to the source and do my own translations when I have the option. The English version probably takes 40 pages, given the normal expansion from Russian to English in the translation process.

What I noted first in the television broadcast on Russia's *Pervy Kanal* and then in the transcript was both how well prepared Lavrov was to deal with a plethora of issues and how he gave detailed answers that went on for many minutes without making reference to any notes.

Secondly, it was obvious he spoke more "freely," using fewer diplomatic euphemisms than I have ever seen before. I conclude that he was given a nod by his boss, President Vladimir Putin, not to hold back, to speak with perfect clarity. Given his experience as one of the longest-serving foreign ministers among the major powers and his innate intellect, Lavrov delivered what sounds at times like dictation for essays in proper written Russian.

For these reasons, I have decided to divide my treatment of the press conference into two parts. One will be Lavrov in his own words. And the other will be my conclusions about the international environment in the coming year given Russia's basic positions, particularly the possible lifting of sanctions on Russia by the United States and the European Union and how the next U.S. administration can best prepare for relations with Russia, assuming there is no dramatic change in the thinking of American elites.

Sergey Lavrov in His Own Words

From the press briefing, I have extracted several big chunks of text that characterize the overarching views on international relations of Lavrov and the Kremlin, applying their Realpolitik prism and focused primarily on U.S.-Russian relations. This is essential if we are not to lose sight of the forest for the trees.

In questions and answers dealing with all countries but one, we hear about separate issues in various locations around the world holding interest mainly for discrete national audiences with their private concerns. With respect to one

country, the U.S., Russia's bilateral relations transcend the minister's in-basket of contingencies.

Indeed, the whole Russian foreign policy really is about relations with the U.S. as expressed in the first two of the three passages in quotation marks below. The third passage, on sanctions, would seem to be more about relations with the E.U. I selected it because the issue of lifting sanctions will surely be a key foreign policy issue facing Russia in the first six months of this year, and behind it all looms the U.S. position on the question.

Question: Is a "re-set" possible in this final year of Barack Obama's administration?

Lavrov: "The question should not be addressed to us. Our inter-state ties sank very low despite the excellent personal relations between former U.S. President George Bush and Russian President Putin. When U.S. President Barack Obama came to the White House and former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton offered a "re-set," this reflected the fact that Americans themselves finally saw the abnormality of the situation wherein Russia and the USA were not cooperating to solve those problems which could not be decided without them...

"We gave a rather constructive response to the "re-set." We said that we appreciate the decision of the new Administration to correct the errors of its predecessors. We achieved quite a lot: the New START Treaty, the entry of Russia into the WTO, an array of new agreements on various conflict situations. But somehow this quickly began to drop back to zero. Now everyone, including our American colleagues, is telling us: "Just fulfill the Minsk accords on Ukraine and immediately everything will return to normal. We will immediately cancel the sanctions and tempting prospects of cooperation will open up between Russia and the United States over much more pleasant issues, not just in the management of crises; right away a constructive partnership program will take shape."

"We are open for cooperation with everyone on an equal, mutually advantageous basis. We, of course, do not want anyone to build their policy based on the assumption that Russia and not Ukraine must fulfill the Minsk accords. It is written there who must fulfill them. I hope that this is well known to the USA. At least, my latest contacts with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the contacts of Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland with Assistant to the Russian President Surkov indicate that the USA can sort out the essence of the Minsk accords. *Grosso modo*, everyone understands everything. ...

"I have just mentioned that people have begun to promise a new "re-set." If we fulfill the Minsk accords, then immediately everything will become fine, with splendid and tempting prospects.

“But the cooling off of relations with the Administration of U.S. President Barack Obama and the end of the period associated with ‘re-set” began long before the Ukraine. Let’s remember how this occurred. First, when we finally got the consent of our Western partners to terms of our joining the WTO which were acceptable to Russia, the Americans understood that it was not in their interests to keep the Jackson-Vanik amendment. Otherwise they would be deprived of those privileges and advantages which are linked to our participation in the WTO. They began to prepare for the removal of this amendment.

“But Americans would not be Americans if they simply abolished it and said, ‘Enough, let’s now cooperate normally.’ They dreamed up the “Magnitsky Act,” although I am certain that what happened to Magnitsky was not set up. I very much hope that the truth will become known to everyone. It is disgusting how a provocation and speculation were built up around the death of a man. Nonetheless, this was done and you know who lobbied for this “Magnitsky Act,” which immediately replaced the Jackson-Vanik amendment.”□

[The Magnitsky Act was enacted by the U.S. Congress in 2012 with the goal of punishing Russian officials believed responsible for the death of Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer who died in prison in 2009 amid accusations and counter-accusations of fraud.]

‘This all began when there was still no Ukraine [crisis], although they now try to lay the blame on violations of OSCE principles. Everything that is going on between the West and Russia is explained by the fact that Russia did not fulfill its obligations, did not respect the world order which was put together in Europe after the Helsinki Act [of 1975], etc. These are all attempts to justify and find an excuse for continuing the policy of containment. But this policy never ended.

‘After the ‘Magnitsky Act’ [in 2012], there was the completely inappropriate, overblown reaction to what happened to Edward Snowden, who found himself in Russia against our wishes [in 2013]. We did not know about this. He did not have a passport, his document was canceled while he was in flight. He could not go anywhere from Russia because of decisions taken in Washington. We could not help but give him the possibility to remain in Russia so as to stay safe, knowing which articles of the law they were threatening him with. The Americans made no secret about this. This was done simply as an elementary protection of a person’s right to life.

“U.S. President Barack Obama then canceled his visit to Russia. They made a huge scandal. Dozens of telephone calls came in from the FBI, from the CIA, the State Department. There were direct contacts with the President. They told us that if we do not give up Snowden, then relations will be broken off. The USA canceled

the visit. It did not take place but U.S. President Obama came for the G-20 Summit in St. Petersburg, where we, by the way, did something useful, we reached agreement on the principles of the removal of Syria's chemical weapons.

"Ukraine was just a pretext. The Ukrainian crisis is linked not so much with justified concern over an alleged violation by Russia of the Helsinki principles (although everything began with Kosovo, with the [1999] bombing of Yugoslavia, etc). This was an expression of irritation that the *coup d'état* did not lead to the results that were expected by those who supported it.

"I will tell you honestly that we don't hold a grudge. We have no such traditions in relations between states. We understand that life is tougher than any ideal, romantic scheme like "re-set" or similar. We also understand that this is a world in which there are harsh clashes of interests that come down to us from the age of the West's total domination and it is in the midst of a long transition period to a more durable system in which there will not be one or even two dominant poles, there will be several. The transition period is long and painful. Old habits die slowly. We all understand this.

"We understand that the USA is interested in having fewer competitors even with regards to those comparable to it in size, influence, military power, economy. We see this in the relations between the USA and China, in how the USA works with the European Union, trying to create a ring around it via the Transatlantic Partnership, and to the east of Russia, to create a Trans-Pacific Partnership which will not include Russia and China. Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about this in detail when he analyzed the processes at work in the world economy and politics. We understand all of this.

"Surely every age brings with it new tendencies, frames of mind in one or another of the elites, especially in major countries which see in their own fashion the ways to fight for their interests. It would be very bad and ruinous for all of us if these processes moved outside the framework of generally accepted norms of international law.

"Then, simply put, everything would be topsy-turvy, and we would be drawn into a world of anarchy and chaos, something like what is going on in the Near East, perhaps without bloodshed. Each would act as he reckons necessary and nothing good would come out of this. It is very important to observe some kind of general rules of play.

"To answer your question, I would like for the USA to have a "re-set" with the whole world, so that the "re-set" was general, so that we could gather together and reconfirm our commitment to the UN Charter, to the principles embodied in it, including non-interference in internal affairs, respect for the sovereignty

and territorial integrity and the right of peoples to self-determination, the right of peoples to choose their own future without interference from outside.”

Question: “At the Munich Security Conference in 2007 President Putin said to the West, “you need us more than we need you.” Is that still Russia’s position?”

Lavrov: “Ideally we both need one another to face the challenges and threats. But, the reality is different. The West comes to us much more often for help than we come to the West.”□

(Lavrov said that in response to Western sanctions, Russia was striving to be self-sufficient and promoting import substitution, but not trying to cut itself off from the world and ready for cooperation based on equality.)

“We must do everything to ensure we do not depend on the whim of one or another group of countries, above all from our Western partners,” as happened when the West took offense at Russia for supporting ethnic Russians in Ukraine who did not recognize the 2014 *coup d’etat*.

“I have cited Dmitry Yarosh [leader of the radical nationalists, the Right Sector] that they wanted to destroy Russian speakers in Ukraine or deprive them of their rights. We want to insure ourselves against such situations.”

“I note that it’s not we who are running to our European colleagues and saying, “Let’s do something to remove the sanctions.” Not at all. We are focused on not depending on such zigzags in Western policy, not depending on Europe’s saluting the USA. But in our bilateral contacts our European colleagues, when they come to us or meet us in international forums, say: “Let’s think of something. Help us carry out the Minsk accords, otherwise these sanctions will do a lot of damage. We want to turn the page.”

“It turns out that in this situation we are needed more by them than they are needed by us. Including for fulfillment of the Minsk accords. Yes, we have influence in Donbass [the ethnic Russian section of eastern Ukraine] and we support them. Surely, without our help and humanitarian deliveries Donbass would be in a pitiful state. But one also has to exert influence in Kiev. We need the West to influence the Kiev authorities, but so far this is not happening.

“Or look at the question of the Iranian nuclear program. At the decisive stages of these negotiations we were literally bombarded with requests when it was necessary to solve the questions of exporting enriched uranium in exchange for natural uranium, which was the key condition for achieving agreements; when it was necessary to resolve the question about who will convert the enrichment sites at Fordu into research for production of medical isotopes, etc.

“They came with requests to us, requests which carry a significant financial burden, or at least which do not bring any material benefit. But we fulfilled our part of the work. Now everyone is calling us and our Chinese colleagues about the North Korean problem: ‘help us do something to make North Korea observe its obligations.’ Or take the case of Syria.”

“I can’t think of any requests we made to our Western colleagues recently. We don’t believe it is proper to make requests. After you sign agreements following negotiations, you now have to execute obligations, not to make requests for favors.”

Question on whether sanctions will end early.

Lavrov: “I’d say that among a large number of our partners there is the awareness that they cannot go on this way any longer, that this is harmful to them. Our justification for speaking about some possible positive changes comes down to the following: our Western partners more and more often begin to understand that they have fallen into a trap of their own making when they said that they will lift the sanctions after Russia fulfills the Minsk accords. They have now understood that, very likely, this was a ‘slip of the tongue.’”

“But in Kiev this was heard very often and was interpreted as an indulgence allowing them not to carry out the Minsk accords. Their failure to perform not only means that Kiev does not have to undertake any actions and fulfill its obligations. It also means that the West will have to keep the sanctions in place against Russia. It was necessary to prove all of this to some gentlemen who are in Kiev fanning radical attitudes.”

“The West understands the hopelessness of the present situation, when everyone pretends that Russia must fulfill the Minsk accords but Ukraine can do nothing, not change its constitution, not give a special status to the Donbass, not put through an amnesty, not organize elections in consultation with Donbass. Everyone understands that no one will resolve these things for Ukraine.

“Everyone understands that this is abnormal, something pathological which emerged in turning the Ukrainian crisis, which arose as a result of an absolutely illegal, anti-constitutional *coup d’etat*, into a measuring stick for all relations between Russia and the West. This is absolutely abnormal, an unhealthy situation, artificially fanned from countries that are far removed from Europe. Europe no longer wants to be held hostage to this situation. For me, this is obvious.”

General Conclusions

In presenting these three long excerpts from Lavrov’s Jan. 26 press conference,

my intention was to give readers a feel for Lavrov's method of argumentation and his somber tone in what was delivered without notes and in response to questions from journalists in the audience.

In his prepared opening remarks, Lavrov had already set out some of the key points in the overall approach to international affairs from Russia's analytical tool of realism and national interest. The number one issue facing Russia and the world from his perspective is to arrive at a new system of managing international affairs. Russia's relations with the West are part and parcel of this broader challenge.

This wished-for new system would be one built on full equality of relations between states, respect for their interests and non-interference in internal affairs. Lavrov was repeating Vladimir Putin's call upon nations to re-dedicate themselves to the principles of the United Nations Charter that Putin issued in New York in September 2015 at the 70th anniversary gathering of the General Assembly. The new system of global governance will come about as a result of reforms to the basic international institutions whereby political and economic power is reallocated in ways that reflect changes in relative economic and military power of nations from the days when these institutions were established.

By itself, there is nothing particular new in this vision. It has been in the public domain for years and guided calls for readjusting the voting powers within the International Monetary Fund. The novel element, which will be shocking to many in Washington, was Sergey Lavrov's clear and repeated identification of the United States as the power frustrating the renewal of world governance by stubbornly defending its hegemonic control of institutions and seeking to consolidate still further its control over its allies in Europe and Asia at the expense of their national interests and in furtherance of its own interests.

Hence, Lavrov's mention of the TPP and TIPP projects. Hence, his repeated mention of forces from afar, meaning the U.S., that have imposed European sanctions on Russia against the wishes of separate E.U. member states.

At one point, in responding to a journalist from Japan, Lavrov completely abandoned veiled language. He said Russia favored in principle giving a permanent seat on the UN Security Council to Japan, but would do so only when it was clear Japan will contribute its own national views to deliberations, broadening the perspectives on the table, and not merely provide the United States with an additional voting member under its control.

It is interesting that Lavrov explicitly denied that Russia feels "offended," or

as I have written using an alternative translation, “holds a grudge” over how it has been treated by the United States in the downward spiral of relations from the high point of the 2009 “re-set” to today’s nadir.

The context for this remark is the ever-present denunciations in mainstream Western media of Vladimir Putin’s speeches on foreign affairs. Putin’s observations on how things went awry since the end of the Cold War are regularly categorized as “diatribes” and “revisionist,” by which is meant aggressive, threatening and possibly irrational.

Lavrov said Russia acknowledges it is a tough world out there and competition is harsh. That is the true sense of his headline remark that there can be no return to “business as usual” or the idealistic notions underlying the “re-set” even when the current sanctions against Russia are lifted.

Russia is nonetheless open for business on equal and mutually advantageous terms where and when possible. In this regard, Lavrov is in complete agreement with American experts like Angela Stent at Georgetown University who advise the incoming U.S. administration in 2017 against planning some new “re-set.” They come to that common conclusion from diametrically opposed premises over who is responsible for the new reality.

Lavrov speaks of our being in a long and painful transition period from a world dominated by the West, which in turn is dominated by one power, the United States, to a multipolar world with a number of key participants in global governance. But that does not exclude amelioration and he appears to share the view now spreading in Western media, that U.S. and European sanctions will be lifted in the near future.

One recent example of this expectation that generates euphoria in Western business circles appeared in Bloomberg online the day before Lavrov’s news conference: “Russian Entente Nears as Allies Hint at End of Ukraine Sanctions.”

The important message, which Sergey Lavrov delivered on Jan. 26, is that Russia has not and will not mend its ways. He told us Russia did not beg for relief from sanctions and is not trading its support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria in return for relief over Ukraine.

We may be sure that the United States and the European Union will present the lifting of sanctions as a trade-off. But the reality will be a retreat from a policy that is unsustainable because it harms Western interests far more than Russian interests. This was the sense of Lavrov’s insistence that the West needs Russia more than Russia needs the West.

The present, ongoing economic harm to European farmers and other select sectors

of the economy from Russia's tit-for-tat embargo is obvious. The harm to U.S. interests is more subtle.

It was recently highlighted in an article published in *Foreign Affairs* magazine by a research fellow of the Cato Institute entitled "Not-So Smart Sanctions." There we read that the Washington establishment is finally worried over the creation by Russia and China of alternative global financial institutions to those based in Washington.

The BRICS Bank, the Asia Infrastructure Development Bank, the introduction of bank clearing centers competing with SWIFT: all are intended to end, once and for all, America's possibilities for inflicting crippling economic pain on those falling into its latest list of enemies as was done to punish the Kremlin over annexation of Crimea and intervention in Donbass.

Lavrov spoke repeatedly about defending "national interests" as the guiding principle of foreign relations. In this connection, the shadow of Hans Morgenthau, a founder and major theorist of America's Realist School, may be said to have shared the podium with him. But Lavrov and the Russians have taken to a new level the principles set out in *Politics Among Nations*, Morgenthau's famous textbook which generations of American college students once studied in their Government 101 courses.

Lavrov's Russia is calling upon nations to shed their chains, to stop pushing their national interests to one side while listening to instructions from Washington. Nations should compete and jostle for influence in a free market of ideas and influences, while playing by generally recognized rules.

If the rules are followed, the international environment will not collapse into chaos notwithstanding sharp contradictions between nations.

Gilbert Doctorow is the European Coordinator, American Committee for East West Accord, Ltd. His latest book *Does Russia Have a Future?* (August 2015) is available in paperback and e-book from Amazon.com and affiliated websites. For donations to support the European activities of ACEWA, write to eastwestaccord@gmail.com. © Gilbert Doctorow, 2015

Hillary Clinton's Own Petard

In 2008, Hillary Clinton sought to exploit Barack Obama's limited foreign policy experience by claiming she was more fit to answer a 3 a.m. phone call announcing some crisis, but her national security judgments continue to demonstrate serious

weaknesses and fail to meet her own standard, writes Bart Gruzalski.

By Bart Gruzalski

Journalist Robert Parry in a recent piece on Hillary Clinton shows us that she has moved to the right of President Barack Obama and is actively courting the support of neocons while operating within the Beltway's foreign policy consensus:

"Clinton is rolling the dice in the belief that most Democrats won't think through the fallacious 'group thinks' of Official Washington or will at least be scared and confused enough to steer away from [Sen. Bernie] Sanders. That way, Clinton believes she can still win the nomination."

Not that this is entirely new. Clinton's attempts to project a commander-in-chief toughness began during her 2008 primary fight against Obama, but her own famous ad from eight years ago gives us a criterion for POTUS that she fails to satisfy.

To underscore doubts about Obama's readiness to be president, Hillary Clinton's team created an ingenious ad that played on the fear factor while emphasizing her experience with military issues and with foreign leaders. As a phone rings in the background, we hear a male voice:

"It's 3 a.m. and your children are safe and asleep. But there's a phone in the White House and it's ringing. Something's happening in the world. Your vote will decide who answers that call: Whether it's someone who already knows the world's leaders, knows the military someone tested and ready to lead in a dangerous world. It's 3 a.m. and your children are safe and asleep. Who do you want answering the phone?"

The visuals begin with the image of a suburban middle-class house, then quickly fades to images of one child after another asleep. A parent opens a door and looks down as the male voice ends with the question above: "Who do you want answering the phone?" The final image is Hillary Clinton wearing a brown business-suit and glasses, picking up the phone: "I'm Hillary Clinton and I approve of this message."

That ad is not running this election cycle, perhaps for good reason. Hillary Clinton has demonstrated that she is not a person with good enough judgment to answer a 3 a.m. phone call.

Administrative Bad Judgment

For instance, Hillary Clinton has told us that none of her Secretary of State

emails were classified. Yet on Jan. 19, the intelligence community's inspector general Charles McCullough responded to inquiries from Senate committees overseeing intelligence matters, saying that some of Clinton's emails contained sensitive information above "top secret."

"Several dozen additional classified emails have been found," he reported, "including ones containing information from so-called 'special access programs.'" The emails about special access programs were so sensitive that "McCullough and some of his aides had to receive clearance" to review the material.

Hillary Clinton's hair-splitting distinction between what was labeled or marked "classified" at the time and what was in fact so sensitive that it deserved a "top secret" stamp (or higher) is irrelevant, for negligence is not a defense when it comes to national security information.

As Secretary of State, Clinton should have realized that some emails sent to her would contain highly sensitive information, even when it was not labeled that way. Her failure to use a secure government server reflects very bad judgment for a person wanting to make decisions about how the U.S. government should respond to 3 a.m. crises "happening in the world."

Jennifer Palmieri, communications director for the Clinton campaign in November, inadvertently confirmed her boss' lousy judgment. Palmieri appeared on Bloomberg TV and said "that Clinton 'didn't really think it through' when she decided to use her personal email account for State Department business."

Political Bad Judgment

But the email brouhaha is not the only significant example of Clinton showing poor judgment. (Arguably far worse, she has admitted to a "mistake" in voting for the Iraq War, which some foreign policy analysts consider the worst foreign policy decision in U.S. history).

Also, on a personal level, seeking to burnish her image as a tough and seasoned player on the world stage, she began a foreign policy address at George Washington University on March 17, 2008, by describing her landing in Bosnia during that country's civil war:

"I remember landing under sniper fire. There was supposed to be some kind of greeting ceremony at the airport, but instead we just ran with our heads down to get into the vehicles to get to our base. There was no greeting ceremony, and we were basically told to run to our cars. Now, that is what happened."

Clinton later said she misspoke after CBS released the video of her, with

daughter Chelsea, greeting dignitaries, receiving flowers, and visiting with a little girl on the tarmac. For Clinton to tell her dramatic tale about her Bosnian tarmac experience when she should have realized that major news agencies had visual records is another instance of very bad judgment.

This also was not a one-off slip-up that Bill Clinton blamed on her being 60 years old and tired (which should raise another red flag since she is now eight years older). She had been repeating versions of the story since December 2007.

So who should answer that urgent 3 a.m. White House phone call? Should it be someone who has exercised seriously bad judgment as a U.S. senator and as Secretary of State as well as verifiably bad judgment in the political arena? Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party's war candidate, has hoisted herself on her own petard.

Bart Gruzalski, Professor Emeritus Northeastern University Boston, has published three books, over 50 articles, as well as articles online. Prior to the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, he traveled the country criticizing the Bush-43 administration's bellicose position and articulating a nonviolent solution to terrorism based on his book on Gandhi.

A Step Toward Campaign Transparency

President Obama has called government "transparency" vital for a democracy. But, in practice, he has favored secrecy, keeping key foreign-policy facts away from Americans (all the better to manipulate them) and even balking at a rule requiring government contractors to disclose campaign spending, the latter only requiring a stroke of his pen, says Bill Moyers.

By Bill Moyers

Barack Obama once confessed to politics' original sin but has yet to atone for it. He now has an opportunity to do so. I speak of his promiscuous relationship with money in politics. During his 2008 race for the White House, Obama opted out of the public funding system for presidential campaigns, the first candidate of a major party to do so since the system was created in 1976, after the Watergate scandals.

His defection chilled hopes that public funding might enable everyday citizens to check the power of the super rich and their super PACs, countering the influence of "dark money", contributions that cannot be traced to their donors.

A friend of mine, a prominent conservative Republican who champions campaign finance reform (yes, there are some and we get along marvelously!) recently told me he believes Obama's decision was a significant blow to the cause for reform.

Six years ago, the conservative majority on the Supreme Court tried to finish it off when they ruled for Big Money, unlimited amounts of it, in their *Citizens United* decision.

In his first State of the Union in 2010, President Obama denounced *Citizens United*, saying that it would reverse a century of law and open "the floodgates for special interests." He was just as blunt last year when he declared flatly that *Citizens United* was "wrong" and had caused "real harm to our democracy." Right on all counts.

Public-interest advocates Lisa Gilbert of Public Citizen and Stephen Spaulding of Common Cause recently reminded us that since *Citizens United* "special interests have spent over \$500 million from secret, undisclosed sources."

Think of it as poison poured into the mainstream of democracy, just as toxic as the lead released in Flint, Michigan's drinking water.

Americans of every stripe know money corrodes our politics. In a poll last year, *The New York Times* and CBS found that 85 percent of us think the system for funding political campaigns should be fundamentally changed or completely rebuilt.

President Obama knows it, too. Despite his own apostasy, he has spoken eloquently over the years against the present system. Unfortunately, he has done nothing about it. He's gone AWOL in our biggest battle for democracy.

Which brings us back to his confession. During that first campaign for president, the *Boston Globe* reported that "In Obama's eight years in the Illinois Senate, from 1996 to 2004, almost two-thirds of the money he raised for his campaigns, \$296,000 of \$461,000, came from PACs, corporate contributions, or unions and many other corporate interests"

Confronted with this by Tim Russert on *Meet the Press*, Obama replied: "I have said repeatedly that money is the original sin in politics and I am not sinless."

Far from sinless, he has in fact been a serial sinner. From repeated campaigns for the state legislature, through his one campaign for the US Senate, to his last campaign for president in 2012, money from organized interests poured into his coffers. The finance industry, communications industry, the health industry, they all had a piece of him, sometimes a very big piece.

In his defense, Obama said he could not “unilaterally disarm.” So like the young Augustine of Hippo, who prayed, “Lord, grant me chastity but not yet,” Barack Obama was saying that when the time arrived, he would sin no more.

Well, Mr. President, it’s time. You have no more campaigns to wage. With a little less than 12 months left in the White House, you have the opportunity to atone for exploiting a system that you have deplored in words if not deeds. You can restart the engine of reform and even demonstrate that *Citizens United* can be tamed.

Just take out your pen and sign an executive order compelling federal contractors to disclose their political spending. In one stroke you can put an end to a blatant practice of political bribery that would be one small step for you and one giant leap for democracy.

It’s an open-and-shut case. In fewer than five minutes, you could face the cameras and announce your decision:

My fellow Americans. I have today signed an executive order requiring any company with a federal contract to disclose how much they spend on politicians and lobbyists, and who is receiving their money. There are several reasons for this.

First, federal contracting is big business. In 2013 alone, the United States government spent about \$460 billion on contracting, with \$177 billion of that going to just 25 companies. Since the year 2000, the top 10 contractors have raked in \$1.5 trillion in federal contracts.

That’s your money. All of it comes from taxpayers. And as the economic analyst Robert Reich reminds us, you are footing the bill twice over. You pay for these corporations to lobby for those contracts. Then you pay for the stuff they sell us. It’s only fair that you see how much it costs for corporations to buy influence.

Second, there is a direct relationship between what a corporation spends on campaign contributions and the amount it receives back in government spending. Federal contractors have long been banned from contributing to federal candidates, parties or political committees, but that ban does not apply to their executives, shareholders and political action committees.

In fact, since the Citizens United decision in 2010, contractors have been free to contribute unlimited amounts of undisclosed money to super PACs and the shadowy operations known as “social welfare organizations.”

It’s now possible for companies that get government contracts to secretly, let

me say it again, secretly, spend untold amounts to elect and re-elect the very legislators who are awarding them those contracts. That's wrong. It's a terrible conflict of interest that undermines the integrity of government.

Some of you will remember that I said the Citizens United decision would harm democracy. I wish it were not so, but I was right; this secrecy in influence peddling by federal contractors is a bad thing. It wastes your money. It distorts the relationship between your government and business.

It works against start-up entrepreneurs who can't afford to hire lobbyists or make political contributions while entrenched old-line companies hire former government officials, members of Congress and their staffs in particular, to steer business their way. Let's put an end to these practices, once and for all.

Third, an open democracy is an honest democracy. Disclosure is the foundation of public trust in government and business, while secrecy invites corruption. Even the Supreme Court justice who wrote the majority opinion for Citizens United acknowledged this to be true.

Justice Anthony Kennedy belongs to another party than I. He adheres to a different ideology. But listen to what he wrote: "With the advent of the Internet, prompt disclosure of [political] expenditures can provide shareholders and citizens with the information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable for their positions and supporters. Shareholders can determine whether their corporation's political speech advances the corporation's interest in making profits, and citizens can see whether elected officials are 'in the pocket' of so-called moneyed interests." I agree with Justice Kennedy.

You see, undisclosed money, "dark money", is not "free speech" as its proponents claim. To the contrary. It's a threat to free speech, especially to citizens like you. Even if you believe money is speech, don't you and every other American have a right to know who's speaking?

Secrecy weakens democracy's backbone, causing it to become brittle, so brittle that fractures are now commonplace. That's one reason Washington is broken and dysfunctional. As Justice Kennedy himself, the author of the Citizens United decision, remember, recently admitted, our system "is not working the way it should."

The executive order I have signed today is a step toward helping us see why it is not working and giving us a way to start fixing it. We are casting sunshine on a system badly in need of light. Sadly, I must report to you that Republicans in Congress are opposed to sunshine. They prefer government do business in the

dark, out of your sight and away from the prying eyes of reporters.

But the Sunlight Foundation has discovered that over one recent five-year period 200 of the most politically active corporations spent a combined \$5.8 billion on federal lobbying and campaign contributions and, in return, got \$4.4 trillion in federal business and support. Yes, \$4.4 trillion, with a “t”. That’s an enormous return on their investment in lobbyists and politicians.

Earlier this month I delivered my last State of the Union address to you. I told you that, “We have to reduce the influence of money in our politics, so that a handful of families or hidden interests can’t bankroll our elections. And if our existing approach to campaign finance reform can’t pass muster in the courts, we need to work together to find a real solution.”

My record on this issue may not inspire confidence, but I offer this executive order as an act of genuine penitence. And I pledge to you that in my remaining months as president I intend to take more steps to put right what I have helped to keep wrong. When I leave this office next January there will be no private citizen in the country more active in the fight to save our public life from the pernicious grip of private greed.

I am not a saint; I am a sinner. But I have been born again, again. And this time I will keep the faith. If you believe in democracy, join me. Thank you and good night.

A note to our readers: Some observers in Washington think President Obama may be about to sign such an order. We are not so sure. He reportedly came close in 2011 when the draft of such an order was leaked.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and other lobbyists roared and the President backed down. The only spunk he has shown on the issue since has been rhetorical. So he could once again capitulate. You can help to stiffen his spine by signing the petition sponsored by the non-partisan group Public Citizen.

As the President himself concluded in his most recent State of the Union address: “Changes in our political process will only happen when the American people demand it. It depends on you. That’s what’s meant by a government of, by, and for the people.”

OK, agreed. But in the meantime, let’s tell the President to stand tall like a leader and do the right thing. Mr. President, sign the executive order compelling federal contractors to disclose all their political spending, including dark money.

My long-time colleague Gail Ablow reported and researched this column.

Ukraine Merges Nazis and Islamists

From the Archive: Many defenders of Ukraine's post-coup government dismiss reports about neo-Nazis playing key roles in the U.S.-backed regime, but even the most enthusiastic Western propagandists have occasionally glimpsed that reality and worse, as Robert Parry reported last July.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on July 7, 2015)

In a curiously upbeat account, The New York Times reported that Islamic militants have joined with Ukraine's far-right and neo-Nazi battalions to fight ethnic Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine. It appears that no combination of violent extremists is too wretched to celebrate as long as they're killing Russians.

The [article](#) by Andrew E. Kramer reported that there were three Islamic battalions "deployed to the hottest zones," such as around the port city of Mariupol. One of the battalions is headed by a former Chechen warlord who goes by the name "Muslim," Kramer wrote, adding:

"The Chechen commands the Sheikh Mansur group, named for an 18th-century Chechen resistance figure. It is subordinate to the nationalist Right Sector, a Ukrainian militia. Right Sector formed during [2014] street protests in Kiev from a half-dozen fringe Ukrainian nationalist groups like White Hammer and the [Trident of Stepan Bandera](#).

"Another, the [Azov group](#), is openly neo-Nazi, using the '[Wolf's Hook](#)' symbol associated with the [Nazi] SS. Without addressing the issue of the Nazi symbol, the Chechen said he got along well with the nationalists because, like him, they loved their homeland and hated the Russians."

As casually as Kramer acknowledged the key front-line role of neo-Nazis and white supremacists fighting for the U.S.-backed Kiev regime, his article did mark an aberration for the Times and the rest of the mainstream U.S. news media, which usually dismiss any mention of this Nazi taint as "Russian propaganda."

During the February 2014 coup that ousted elected President Viktor Yanukovich, the late fascist Stepan Bandera was one of the Ukrainian icons celebrated by the Maidan protesters. During World War II, Bandera headed the Organization of

Ukrainian Nationalists-B, a radical paramilitary movement that sought to transform Ukraine into a racially pure state. At times coordinating with Adolf Hitler's SS, OUN-B took part in the expulsion and extermination of tens of thousands of Jews and Poles.

Though most of the Maidan protesters in 2013-14 appeared motivated by anger over political corruption and by a desire to join the European Union, neo-Nazis made up a significant number and spearheaded much of the violence against the police. Storm troopers from the Right Sektor and Svoboda party seized government buildings and decked them out with Nazi insignias and a Confederate battle flag, the universal symbol of white supremacy.

Then, as the protests turned bloodier from Feb. 20-22, the neo-Nazis surged to the forefront. Their well-trained militias, organized in 100-man brigades called "sotins" or "the hundreds," led the final assaults against police and forced Yanukovich and many of his officials to flee for their lives.

In the days after the coup, as the neo-Nazi militias effectively controlled the government, European and U.S. diplomats scrambled to help the shaken parliament put together the semblance of a respectable regime, although four ministries, including national security, were awarded to the right-wing extremists in recognition of their crucial role in ousting Yanukovich.

At that point, virtually the entire U.S. news media put on blinders about the neo-Nazi role, all the better to sell the coup to the American public as an inspirational story of reform-minded "freedom fighters" standing up to "Russian aggression." The U.S. media delicately stepped around the neo-Nazi reality by keeping out relevant context, such as the background of national security chief Andriy Parubiy, who founded the Social-National Party of Ukraine in 1991, blending radical Ukrainian nationalism with neo-Nazi symbols. Parubiy was commandant of the Maidan's "self-defense forces."

Barbarians at the Gate

At times, the mainstream media's black-out of the brown shirts was almost comical. In February 2015, almost a year after the coup, a New York Times article about the government's defenders of Mariupol hailed the crucial role played by the Azov battalion but managed to avoid noting its well-documented Nazi connections.

That article by Rick Lyman presented the situation in Mariupol as if the advance by ethnic Russian rebels amounted to the barbarians at the gate while the inhabitants were being bravely defended by the forces of civilization, the Azov battalion. In such an inspirational context, it presumably wasn't considered

appropriate to mention the Swastikas and SS markings.

Now, the Kiev regime has added to those “forces of civilization” , resisting the Russ-kie barbarians , Islamic militants with ties to terrorism. In September 2014, Marcin Mamon, a reporter for the Intercept, reached a vanguard group of these Islamic fighters in Ukraine through the help of his “contact in Turkey with the Islamic State [who] had told me his ‘brothers’ were in Ukraine, and I could trust them.”

The Times article avoided delving into the terrorist connections of these Islamist fighters. But Kramer did bluntly acknowledge the Nazi truth about the Azov fighters. He also noted that American military advisers in Ukraine “are specifically prohibited from giving instruction to members of the Azov group.” [That prohibition was lifted in U.S. legislation passed in late 2015.]

While the U.S. advisers were under orders to keep their distance from the neo-Nazis, the Kiev regime has been quite open about its approval of the central military role played by these extremists whether neo-Nazis, white supremacists or Islamic militants. These extremists are considered very aggressive and effective in killing ethnic Russians.

The regime has shown little concern about widespread reports of “death squad” operations targeting suspected pro-Russian sympathizers in government-controlled towns. But such human rights violations should come as no surprise given the Nazi heritage of these units and the connection of the Islamic militants to hyper-violent terrorist movements in the Middle East.

But the Times treated this lethal mixture of neo-Nazis and Islamic extremists as a good thing. After all, they were targeting opponents of the “white-hatted” Kiev regime, while the ethnic Russian rebels and the Russian government wear the “black hats.”

As an example of that tone, Kramer wrote: “Even for Ukrainians hardened by more than a year of war here against Russian-backed separatists, the appearance of Islamic combatants, mostly Chechens, in towns near the front lines comes as something of a surprise, and for many of the Ukrainians, a welcome one. Anticipating an attack in the coming months, the Ukrainians are happy for all the help they can get.”

So, the underlying message seems to be that it’s time for the American people and the European public to step up their financial and military support for a Ukrainian regime that has unleashed on ethnic Russians a combined force of Nazis, white supremacists and Islamic militants (considered “brothers” of the Islamic State).

[For more on the Azov battalion, see Consortiumnews.com's "[US House Admits Nazi Role in Ukraine](#)."]

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](#)).
