

Behind the Crimea/Russia Reunion

Exclusive: Official Washington marches in propaganda lockstep about Crimea's decision to rejoin Russia two years ago, with references to a Russian "invasion" and a "sham" referendum of Crimea's voters, but the reality is different, says ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

With high symbolism Russian President Vladimir Putin is visiting Crimea "to check on the construction of the Kerch Strait Bridge, which will link the Crimean peninsula and continental Russia," the Kremlin announced on Thursday.

As the Russians like to say, "It is no accident" that he chose today – marking the second anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea three weeks after the U.S.-sponsored coup in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014, and just days after a referendum in which Crimean voters approved leaving Ukraine and rejoining Russia by a 96 percent majority.

The 12-mile bridge is a concrete metaphor, so to speak, for the re-joining of Crimea and Russia. When completed (the target is December 2018), it will be the longest bridge in Russia.

Yet, the Obama administration continues to decry the political reunion between Crimea and Russia, a relationship that dates back to the Eighteenth Century. Instead, the West has accused Russia of violating its pledge in the 1994 Budapest agreement – signed by Ukraine, Russia, Great Britain and the U.S. – "to respect the independence and sovereignty and existing borders of Ukraine," in exchange for Ukraine surrendering its Soviet-era nuclear weapons.

Did Moscow violate the Budapest agreement when it annexed Crimea? A fair reading of the text yields a Yes to that question. Of course, there were extenuating circumstances, including alarm among Crimeans over what the unconstitutional ouster of Ukraine's president might mean for them, as well as Moscow's not unfounded nightmare of NATO taking over Russia's major, and only warm-water, naval base at Sevastopol in Crimea.

But what is seldom pointed out is that the other parties, including the United States, seem to have been guilty, too, in promoting a coup d'état removing the democratically elected president and essentially disenfranchising millions of ethnic Russian Ukrainians who had voted for President Viktor Yanukovich. In such a context, it takes a markedly one-dimensional view to place blame solely on Russia for violating the Budapest agreement.

Did the Western-orchestrated coup in Kiev violate the undertaking “to respect the independence and sovereignty” of Ukraine? How about the pledge in the Budapest agreement “to refrain from economic coercion designed to subordinate to their own interest the exercise by the Ukraine of the rights inherent in its sovereignty.” Political and economic interference were rife in the months before the February 2014 coup. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Who Violated Ukraine’s Sovereignty?”](#)]

Did Ukrainian President Yanukovich expect to be overthrown if he opted for Moscow’s economic offer, and not Europe’s? Hard to tell. But if the putsch came as a total surprise, he sorely underestimated what \$5 billion in “democracy promotion” by Washington can buy.

After Yanukovich turned down the European Community’s blandishments, seeing deep disadvantages for Ukraine, American neoconservatives like National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman and Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland pulled out all the stops to enable Ukraine to fulfill what Nuland called its “European aspirations.”

“The revolution will not be televised,” or so the saying goes. But the Feb. 22, 2014 putsch in Kiev was YouTube-ized two-and-a-half weeks in advance. Recall Nuland’s amateurish, boorish – not to mention irresponsible – use of an open telephone line to plot regime change in Ukraine with fellow neocon, U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt, during [an intercepted conversation](#) posted on YouTube on Feb. 4.

Nuland tells Pyatt, “Yats is the guy. He’s got the economic experience, the governing experience. He’s the guy you know. ... He has warned there is an urgent need for unpopular cutting of subsidies and social payments before Ukraine can improve.”

Arseniy Yatsenyuk (aka “Yats”) was quickly named prime minister of the coup regime, which was immediately given diplomatic recognition by Washington. Since then, he has made a royal mess of things. Ukraine is an economic basket case, and “Yats” barely survived a parliamentary vote of no confidence and is widely believed to be on his way out.

Did Moscow’s strong reaction to the coup, to the danger of NATO setting up shop next door in Ukraine come as a surprise to Nuland and other advisers? If so, she ought to get new advisers, and quickly. That Russia would not let Crimea become a NATO base should have been a no-brainer.

Nuland may have seen the coup as creating a win-win situation. If Putin acted decisively, it would be all the easier to demonize him, denounce “Russian

aggression,” and put a halt to the kind of rapprochement between President Barack Obama and Putin that thwarted neocon plans for shock and awe against Syria in late summer 2013. However, if Putin acquiesced to the Ukrainian coup and accepted the dangers it posed to Russia, eventual membership for Ukraine in NATO might become more than a pipedream.

Plus, if Putin swallowed the humiliation, think of how politically weakened he would have become inside Russia. As NED’s Gershman made clear, not only did American neocons see Ukraine as “the biggest prize” but as a steppingstone to ultimately achieve “regime change” in Moscow, or as Gershman wrote, “Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself.”

Russian Equities

In a formal address in the Kremlin on March 18, 2014, the day Crimea was re-incorporated into Russia, Putin went from dead serious to somewhat jocular in discussing the general issue:

“We have already heard declarations from Kiev about Ukraine soon joining NATO. What would this have meant for Crimea and Sevastopol in the future? It would have meant that NATO’s navy would be right there in this city of Russia’s military glory, and this would create not an illusory but a perfectly real threat to the whole of southern Russia. ...

“We are not opposed to cooperation with NATO ... [but] NATO remains a military alliance, and we are against having a military alliance making itself at home right in our backyard or in our historic territory. I simply cannot imagine that we would travel to Sevastopol to visit NATO sailors. Of course, most of them are wonderful guys, but it would be better to have them come and visit us, be our guests, rather than the other way around.”

A little-known remark by Putin a month later (on April 17, 2014) was unusually blunt in focusing on one of the main reasons behind Moscow’s strong reaction – namely, Russia’s felt need to thwart Washington’s plan to incorporate Ukraine and Crimea into the U.S. anti-ballistic missile deployment encircling Russia. Putin was quite direct:

“This issue is no less, and probably even more important, than NATO’s eastward expansion. Incidentally, our decision on Crimea was partially prompted by this.”

This is a serious bone of contention, with far reaching implications. In short, if the Russian military becomes convinced that the Pentagon thinks it has the capability to carry out a strategic strike without fear of significant retaliation, the strategic tripwire for a nuclear exchange will regress more

than four decades to the extremely dangerous procedure of “launch on warning,” allowing mere minutes to “use ‘em, or lose ‘em.”

Russia has been repeatedly rebuffed – or diddled – when it has suggested bilateral talks on this key issue. Four years ago, for example, at the March 2012 summit in Seoul, Russia’s then-President Dmitry Medvedev asked Obama when the U.S. would be prepared to address Russian concerns over European missile defense.

In remarks picked up by camera crews, Obama asked for some “space” until after the U.S. election. Obama can be heard saying, “This is my last election. After my election, I have more flexibility.” Putin claims to have seen no flexibility on this strategic question.

What Coup?

The Obama administration and its stenographers in the mainstream U.S. media would like the relevant Ukrainian history to start on Feb. 23, 2014 with “Yats” and his coup cronies deemed the “legitimate” authorities. To that end, there was a need to airbrush what George Friedman, president of the think-tank STRATFOR, publicly called “the most blatant coup in history” – the one plotted by Nuland and Pyatt in early February 2014 and carried out on Feb. 22.

As for Russia’s alleged designs on Crimea, one searches in vain for evidence that, before the coup, the Kremlin had given much thought to the vulnerability of the peninsula and a possible need to annex it. According to the public record, Putin first focused on Crimea at a strategy meeting on Feb. 23, the day after the coup.

Yet, given the U.S. mainstream media’s propagandistic reporting on the Ukraine crisis, it is small wonder that the American people forgot about (or never heard of) the putsch in Kiev. The word “coup” was essentially banished from the U.S. media’s lexicon regarding Ukraine.

The New York Times went so far as to publish what it deemed an investigative article in early 2015 announcing that there was no coup in Ukraine, just President Yanukovich mysteriously disappearing off to Russia. In reaching its no-coup conclusion, the Times ignored any evidence that there was a coup, including the Nuland-Pyatt phone call. In regards to Ukraine, “coup” became just another unutterable four-letter word.

Last year, when Sen. John McCain continued the “no coup” fiction, I placed the following letter in the *Washington Post* on July 1, 2015 (the censors apparently being away at the beach):

“In his June 28 Sunday Opinion essay, ‘The Ukraine cease-fire fiction,’ Sen. John McCain was wrong to write that Russian President Vladimir Putin annexed Crimea without provocation. What about the coup in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014, that replaced President Viktor Yanukovich with pro-Western leaders favoring membership in NATO? Was that not provocation enough?

“This glaring omission is common in The Post. The March 10 World Digest item ‘Putin had early plan to annex Crimea’ described a ‘secret meeting’ Mr. Putin held on Feb. 23, 2014, during which ‘Russia decided it would take the Crimean Peninsula.’ **No mention was made of the coup the previous day. ...**” (emphasis added)

And so it goes. More recently, in Jeffrey Goldberg’s lengthy *magnum opus* in *The Atlantic* on Obama’s foreign policy, there were two mentions of how Russia “invaded” Crimea, two allusions to Russia’s “invasion” of Ukraine, but not a word about the coup in Kiev.

Invincible Ignorance

In Catholic theology, the theory that some people can be “invincibly ignorant” can lessen or even erase their guilt. Many Americans are so malnourished on accurate news – and so busy trying to make ends meet – that they would seem to qualify for this dispensation, with pardon for not knowing about things like the coup in Kiev and other key happenings abroad.

The following, unnerving example brings this to mind: A meeting of progressives that I attended last year was keynoted by a professor from a local Washington university. Discussing what she called the Russian “invasion” of Crimea, the professor bragged about her 9-year-old son for creating a large poster in Sunday School saying, “Mr. Putin, What about the commandment ‘Thou Shall Not Kill?’” The audience nodded approvingly.

This picnic, thought I, needed a skunk. So I asked the professor what her little boy was alluding to. My question was met by a condescending smirk of disbelief: “Crimea, of course.” I asked how many people had been killed in Crimea. “Oh, hundreds, probably thousands,” was her answer. I told her that there were, in fact, no reports of anyone having been killed.

I continued, explaining that, with respect to Russia’s “invasion,” what you don’t see in the “mainstream media” is that, a treaty between Ukraine and Russia from the late 1990s allowed Russia to station up to 25,000 Russian troops on the Crimean peninsula. There were 16,000 there, when a U.S.-led coup ousted the democratically elected government in Kiev on Feb. 22, 2014. (I had grabbed the attention of the audience; yet stares of incredulity persisted.)

In contrast to Crimea's bloodless political secession from Ukraine, the Ukrainian government's "anti-terror operation" against ethnic Russians in the east who resisted the coup authorities in Kiev has killed an estimated 10,000 people, many of them civilians. Yet, in the mainstream U.S. media, this carnage is typically blamed on Putin, not on the Ukrainian military which sent to the front neo-Nazi and other right-wing militias (such as the Azov battalion) contemptuous of ethnic Russians. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Ukraine Merges Nazis and Islamists.](#)"]

A few weeks before the professor's remarks, after a speaking engagement in Moscow, I had a chance to do a little souvenir shopping on the Arbat. The behavior of the sales people brought me up short. It was decades since I had served as a CIA officer in the Soviet Union; the shopkeepers then were usually taciturn, allergic to discussing politics, and not at all given to bragging about their leaders.

This time it was different. The sales people wanted to know what I thought of President Putin. They were eager to thrust two coffee cups into the shopping bag that I had filled with small gifts for our grandchildren. On one was emblazoned the Russian words for "polite people" under an image of two men with insignia-less green uniforms – depicting the troops that surrounded and eventually took over Ukrainian installations and government buildings in Crimea without a shot being fired. The other cup bore a photo of Putin over the Russian words for "the most polite of people."

The short conversation that ensued made it immediately clear that Russian salespeople in Moscow – unlike many "sophisticated" Americans – were well aware that the troubles in Ukraine and Crimea began in Kiev on Feb 22, 2014, with "the most blatant coup in history." And, not least, they were proud of the way Putin used the "polite green men" to ensure that Crimea was not lost to NATO.

Ray McGovern works for Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. During his 27-year career as a CIA analyst he headed the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch. In retirement, he helped create Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).

Obama's Plea for Validation

President Obama's lengthy interviews with a neocon journalist from an

establishment magazine suggest Obama is still searching futilely for Official Washington's blessings on his somewhat "realist" foreign policy, writes Michael Brenner.

By Michael Brenner

The Atlantic has just published a long essay, *The Obama Doctrine*, by their Washington national correspondent, Jeffrey Goldberg. Based in most part on wide-ranging reflective interviews with President Barack Obama, the article makes extensive use of direct quotes from that interview. Considerable space is devoted to the various American engagements in the Middle East along with Obama's views on prospects for the region.

It is a remarkable journalistic event insofar as it represents a preemptive attempt by a sitting president to shape the discourse about his record and his legacy. What he says is revealing – less as analysis and interpretation of actions taken, though, than as an "exhibit" of all that is peculiar about Obama's policy-making style – and what the implications for American diplomacy have been.

Obama's overall stance is one of dissociation from his own administration and its conduct. Throughout, he appears to be referring to himself in the third person. This can be seen as the soon-to-be-memoir writer's attempt to cast himself as detached statesman while distancing himself from errors made.

However, this degree of dissociation by a still incumbent president is odd. It suggests that he has been playing the role of participant-observer while in the Oval Office. Moreover, it conveys his sense that somehow the words he utters are equivalent to actions. Indeed, a feature of his presidency has been a frequent mismatch of words and deeds which never get reconciled. Nor do they in this seemingly candid interview. That raises a cardinal question: is this honest reflection or a characteristic flight from accountability?

Two, this strange attitude is most pronounced in his remarks about the Middle East. For example, he inveighs against allowing the United States to be placed in a position of picking sides in Islam's Sunni-Shi'ite civil war. He is especially adamant about the dangers of American power being used as a tool of the Saudis to advance their cause.

Yet, this is exactly what he has been doing in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Bahrain. Moreover, he never has confronted the Saudi leaders about the promotion of wahabbism or their concrete support for the Islamic State and Al Qaeda (in Syria and Yemen – where they fight side-by-side with Saudi troops) – either in private or in public.

Let's step back and reflect on this. Barack Obama, President of the United States, in telling a journalist that his most important "ally" in the Middle East has been aiding and abetting America's mortal enemies – and that they should stop. Yet, three years after those hostile actions began he has yet to voice his displeasure directly in numerous meetings.

Instead, he gets an interview published in a magazine that the Saudi leaders might pick up in the waiting room at the Mayo Clinic on their next medical visit. If there is any sense or logic to this, it must conform to a mental process never before encountered.

Obama urges that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran learn to co-exist, "to share space," in the region. Yet, in the wake of the nuclear accord, he's gone overboard in denouncing the Islamic Republic of Iran as the primary source of instability in the Middle East and insists that until they cease and desist, no normalization is possible.

As Goldberg quotes Susan Rice in seconding the President: "The Iran deal was never primarily about trying to open a new era of relations between the U.S. and Iran." In other words, if the U.S. refuses adamantly to "share space" – as in Iraq – on what grounds does he here encourage the Saudis to do so? On Turkey, Obama is similarly mealy-mouthed as regards their tangible contributions to both the Islamic State and Al Qaeda's Nusra Front – although he refrains from the same direct criticism of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Finally, Obama strongly criticizes Washington's foreign policy Establishment as being overly rigid in their thinking and imposing their views on American leaders. This is baffling – is not the President the head of the Establishment? Has Obama not stocked his two administrations – to a man and to a woman – with members of the Establishment? Robert Gates, David Petraeus and John Brennan were his appointees.

Gates boasts in his memoir of the scheme he orchestrated to force Obama's hand in escalating in Afghanistan in 2009. With his allies Petraeus and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Gates planned to expand it further and to make its duration indefinite. Only Gen. Stanley McChrystal's inopportune public insults of the President prevented its success.

Does he not invite Robert Kagan and Thomas Friedman to intimate Camp David deep think sessions? Did Obama not put Victoria Nuland, Dick Cheney's principal deputy foreign policy adviser (and Kagan's wife), in charge of European policy where she helped foment the Ukrainian coup – and from which post she aggressively runs a belligerent policy toward Russia?

Hasn't he bowed the knee before the Israeli lobby – going so far as to allow himself to be humiliated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu before Congress without any rejoinder? Does he not have the authority to address the country directly and to instruct them about world realities?

Yet, he whines to Goldberg that he is somehow caught in a web spun by “the Establishment.” What is a reasonable interpretation of this illogic? Election politics? – but nothing has changed since his 2012 re-election. (Anyway, is starting a new war in the Middle East a sure-fire vote-getter?) Was the President fantasizing for seven years, was he blackmailed, did he lack the conviction to take different paths, or was he simply weak and feckless?

Here is the Obama view of where he fits in Washington's power map of foreign policy-makers/thinkers: “There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It's a playbook that comes out of the foreign-policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses.

“Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions. In the midst of an international challenge like Syria, you get judged harshly if you don't follow the playbook, even if there are good reasons why it does not apply.”

The deference and passivity accorded the upholders of the conventional wisdom exposes the critical flaw in Obama's interpretation of his authority as Chief Executive and Commander-in-Chief. He is not a constrained Doge of Venice under strict surveillance by the Great Council of aristocrats. He is not just the custodian of some Holy Grail in the sacred custody of a vestal priesthood. He is not the prize student being tested in a simulation exercise by masters of the guild.

The Washington Consensus embodied by the head-nodders of the think tanks and op-ed pages is nothing more than the calcified corpus of failed ideas which have brought the United States nothing but wrack and ruin for (at least) the past 15 years. The Iraq debacle cut the ground from under it – thereby helping to clear the way for Obama's entry into the White House. His historic task was reformation. Instead, he decided that acceptance into the ranks of the Establishment was worth a ritualized surrender.

All of this is baffling. Part of the explanation lies in the President's singular personality. Despite his high intelligence, he seems to live with a great number of unreconciled contradictions. Some have to do with his background and upbringing. Some are intellectual. The title of The Atlantic article is misleading. There is no “Obama Doctrine.” Incoherence is the hallmark of

American actions in the Middle East and elsewhere. The interview with Goldberg confirms that.

Seeking Validation

Barack Obama gave Goldberg many, many hours of his time. The President allowed the writer to accompany him on international jaunts, and accorded him entry to his inner circle. Goldberg has thanked the President by concentrating on the supposed historic error of not bombing Syria when Assad allegedly (if factually mistakenly) was accused of crossing the notorious "red line" by using sarin gas.

That is the pivot of the article; it is returned to time after time in positing the hard-line critique of the Obama foreign policy as the one authoritative perspective. That was predictable. Goldberg is an Israeli who started his career at the Likud megaphone *The Jerusalem Post*. Why does a President afford such liberties to a tendentious journalist?

European monarchs of old had court portraitists. American presidencies have Boswells like Bob Woodward and now Jeff Goldberg. Boswells who are not friends but on assignment. The purpose seems similar: to immortalize the ruler at the height of his powers. To show a forceful leader mastering a daunting problem with resolve, sobriety and dedication to the interests of his fellow citizens.

This being America, the subject matter has to be one of action and suspense. Bush the Younger seeking retribution for 9/11. Now Barack Obama in a titanic struggle to escape the coils of stifling dogma.

A narrative account that covers a long span of time, though, does have a few drawbacks. It cannot fix the image at a single moment that will last for eternity. However laudatory, the written account is liable to be viewed differently as time goes by. And Goldberg's portrait is not very becoming.

A picture wings the flying hour; a story is part of the flow of events. There is the further drawback that the chronicler may depict persons and things in ways that are not entirely complimentary to the main protagonist in the drama.

Journalistic talents may be available for lease but they do not come with a money back guarantee. For the exchange currency is not hard cash but access. The White House gets surefire blockbuster publicity – and, in this case, the chance to set in place the first sketch of his Presidential record.

A complication is that while the President is the patron, the commission is loosely written to allow the artist unmonitored access to other members of the court. Their vanities and ambitions are not identical with his. See the quoted remarks of John Kerry and Pentagon officials.

In the light of the ensuing risks, why does Barack Obama enter into such a pact? Our celebrity culture provides part of the answer. Publicity is what it is all about. A public figure whose meteoric rise is a testament to star power must be acutely sensitive to the imperative of how vital to success is mythic imagery and turns in the limelight. The stage lights have the special glow when energized by a graphic account of star performance.

Then there is the simple truth that presidents want to celebrate themselves. They are the ultimate celebrity in a celebrity culture. They in fact feel proud of what they do and how they do it. Reality is clay in my hands. A successful leader must never allow the future to be hostage to history – even yesterday's history. Except where history can be bent better to serve fresh exigencies – or a post-presidency career of 30-35 years.

The selection of a hawk like Goldberg to be his interlocutor demonstrates another truth that also can be inferred from the Obama discourse. Authority on matters of foreign policy is understood to rest with the guardians of the very Establishment that constrains him.

It is the neocons and their hard-line companions in arms who, he believes, are the cynosure of core American beliefs about the world and our place in it. So it ultimately is from them that he must seek validation. This conviction of Obama's, of course, becomes self-confirming – as we have observed for seven years.

Obama is a man of reflection, at least as concerns his own identity and self-image. Maybe, the serial interviews with Goldberg were the first try at coming to terms with himself as director of American foreign policy. So he invited Goldberg to join him in an excursion through the presidential mind – a Virgil exploring his own psyche.

Michael Brenner is a professor of international affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. mbren@pitt.edu
