

# Key Neocon Calls on US to Oust Putin

**Exclusive:** A prominent neocon paymaster, whose outfit dispenses \$100 million in U.S. taxpayers' money each year, has called on America to "summon the will" to remove Russian President Putin from office, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The neoconservative president of the U.S.-taxpayer-funded National Endowment for Democracy [NED] has called for the U.S. government to "summon the will" to engineer the overthrow of Russian President Vladimir Putin, saying that the 10-year-old murder case of a Russian journalist should be the inspiration.

Carl Gershman, who has headed NED since its founding in 1983, doesn't cite any evidence that Putin was responsible for the death of Anna Politkovskaya but uses [a full column](#) in The Washington Post on Friday to create that impression, calling her death "a window to Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin autocrat whom Americans are looking at for the first time."

Gershman wraps up his article by writing: "Politkovskaya saw the danger [of Putin], but she and other liberals in Russia were not strong enough to stop it. The United States has the power to contain and defeat this danger. The issue is whether we can summon the will to do so. Remembering Politkovskaya can help us rise to this challenge."

That Gershman would so directly call for the ouster of Russia's clearly popular president represents further proof that NED is a neocon-driven vehicle that seeks to create the political circumstances for "regime change" even when that means removing leaders who are elected by a country's citizenry.

And there is a reason for NED to see its job in that way. In 1983, NED essentially took over the CIA's role of influencing electoral outcomes and destabilizing governments that got in the way of U.S. interests, except that NED carried out those functions in a quasi-overt fashion while the CIA did them covertly.

NED also serves as a sort of slush fund for neocons and other favored U.S. foreign policy operatives because a substantial portion of NED's money circulates through U.S.-based non-governmental organizations or NGOs.

That makes Gershman an influential neocon paymaster whose organization dispenses some \$100 million a year in U.S. taxpayers' money to activists, journalists and NGOs both in Washington and around the world. The money helps them undermine governments in Washington's disfavor – or as Gershman would prefer to

say, “build democratic institutions,” even when that requires overthrowing democratically elected leaders.

NED was a lead actor in the Feb. 22, 2014 coup ousting Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovich in a U.S.-backed putsch that touched off the civil war inside Ukraine between Ukrainian nationalists from the west and ethnic Russians from the east. The Ukraine crisis has become a flashpoint for the dangerous New Cold War between the U.S. and Russia.

Before the anti-Yanukovich coup, NED was funding scores of projects inside Ukraine, which Gershman had identified as “the biggest prize” in a Sept. 26, 2013 column also published in The Washington Post.

In that column, Gershman wrote that after the West claimed Ukraine, “Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself.” In other words, Gershman already saw Ukraine as an important step toward an even bigger prize, a “regime change” in Moscow.

Less than five months after Gershman’s column, pro-Western political activists and neo-Nazi street fighters – with strong support from U.S. neocons and the State Department – staged a coup in Kiev driving Yanukovich from office and installing a rabidly anti-Russian regime, which the West promptly dubbed “legitimate.”

In reaction to the coup and the ensuing violence against ethnic Russians, the voters of Crimea approved a referendum with 96 percent of the vote to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia, a move that the West’s governments and media decried as a Russian “invasion” and “annexation.”

The new regime in Kiev then mounted what it called an “Anti-Terrorism Operation” or ATO against ethnic Russians in the east who had supported Yanukovich and refused to accept the anti-constitutional coup in Kiev as legitimate.

The ATO, spearheaded by neo-Nazis from the Azov battalion and other extremists, killed thousands of ethnic Russians, prompting Moscow to covertly provide some assistance to the rebels, a move denounced by the West as “aggression.”

### **Blaming Putin**

In his latest column, Gershman not only urges the United States to muster the courage to oust Putin but he shows off the kind of clever sophistry that America’s neocons are known for. Though lacking any evidence, he intimates that Putin ordered the murder of Politkovskaya and pretty much every other “liberal” who has died in Russia.

It is a technique that I've seen used in other circumstances, such as the lists of "mysterious deaths" that American right-wingers publish citing people who crossed the paths of Bill and Hillary Clinton and ended up dead. This type of smear spreads suspicion of guilt not based on proof but on the number of acquaintances and adversaries who have met untimely deaths.

In the 1990s, one conservative friend of mine pointed to the Clintons' "mysterious deaths" list and marveled that even if only a few were the victims of a Clinton death squad that would be quite a story, to which I replied that if even one were murdered by the Clintons that would be quite a story – but that there was no proof of any such thing.

"Mysterious deaths" lists represent a type of creepy conspiracy theory that shifts the evidentiary burden onto the targets of the smears who must somehow prove their innocence, when there is no evidence of their guilt (only vague suspicions). It is contemptible when applied to American leaders and it is contemptible when applied to Russian leaders, but it is not beneath Carl Gershman.

Beyond that, Gershman's public musing about the U.S. somehow summoning "the will" to remove Putin might – in a normal world – disqualify NED and its founding president from the privilege of dispensing U.S. taxpayers' money to operatives in Washington and globally. It is extraordinarily provocative and dangerous, an example of classic neocon hubris.

While the neocons do love their tough talk, they are not known for thinking through their "regime change" schemes. The idea of destabilizing nuclear-armed Russia with the goal of ousting Putin, with his 82 percent approval ratings, must rank as the nuttiest and most reckless neocon scheme of all.

Gershman and his neocon pals may fantasize about making Russia's economy scream while financing pro-Western "liberals" who would stage disruptive protests in Red Square, but he and his friends haven't weighed the consequences even if they could succeed.

Given the devastating experience that most Russians had when NED's beloved Russian "liberals" helped impose American "shock therapy" in the 1990s – an experiment that reduced average life expectancy by a full decade – it's hard to believe that the Russian people would simply take another dose of that bitter medicine sitting down.

Even if the calculating Putin were somehow removed amid economic desperation, he is far more likely to be followed by a much harder-line Russian nationalist who might well see Moscow's arsenal of nuclear weapons as the only way to protect

Mother Russia's honor. In other words, the neocons' latest brash "regime change" scheme might be their last – and the last for all humanity.

### **A Neocon Slush Fund**

Gershman's arrogance also raises questions about why the American taxpayer should tolerate what amounts to a \$100 million neocon slush fund which is used to create dangerous mischief around the world. Despite having "democracy" in its name, NED appears only to favor democratic outcomes when they fit with Official Washington's desires.

If a disliked candidate wins an election, NED acts as if that is prima facie evidence that the system is undemocratic and must be replaced with a process that ensures the selection of candidates who will do what the U.S. government tells them to do. Put differently, NED's name is itself a fraud.

But that shouldn't come as a surprise since NED was created in 1983 at the urging of Ronald Reagan's CIA Director William J. Casey, who wanted to off-load some of the CIA's traditional work ensuring that foreign elections turned out in ways acceptable to Washington, and when they didn't – as in Iran under Mossadegh, in Guatemala under Arbenz or in Chile under Allende – the CIA's job was to undermine and remove the offending electoral winner.

In 1983, Casey and the CIA's top propagandist, Walter Raymond Jr., who had been moved to Reagan's National Security Council staff, wanted to create a funding mechanism to support outside groups, such as Freedom House and other NGOs, so they could engage in propaganda and political action that the CIA had historically organized and paid for covertly. The idea emerged for a congressionally funded entity that would serve as a conduit for this money.

In one undated letter to then-White House counselor Edwin Meese III, Casey urged creation of a "National Endowment," but he recognized the need to hide the strings being pulled by the CIA. "Obviously we here [at CIA] should not get out front in the development of such an organization, nor should we appear to be a sponsor or advocate," Casey wrote.

The National Endowment for Democracy took shape in late 1983 as Congress decided to also set aside pots of money – within NED – for the Republican and Democratic parties and for organized labor, creating enough bipartisan largesse that passage was assured.

But some in Congress thought it was important to wall the NED off from any association with the CIA, so a provision was included to bar the participation of any current or former CIA official, according to one congressional aide who helped write the legislation.

This aide told me that one night late in the 1983 session, as the bill was about to go to the House floor, the CIA's congressional liaison came pounding at the door to the office of Rep. Dante Fascell, a senior Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee and a chief sponsor of the bill.

The frantic CIA official conveyed a single message from CIA Director Casey: the language barring the participation of CIA personnel must be struck from the bill, the aide recalled, noting that Fascell consented to the demand, not fully recognizing its significance – that it would permit the continued behind-the-scenes involvement of Raymond and Casey.

The aide said Fascell also consented to the Reagan administration's choice of Carl Gershman to head NED, again not recognizing how this decision would affect the future of the new entity and American foreign policy.

Gershman, who had followed the classic neoconservative path from youthful socialism to fierce anticommunism, became NED's first (and, to this day, only) president. Though NED is technically independent of U.S. foreign policy, Gershman in the early years coordinated decisions on grants with Raymond at the NSC.

For instance, on Jan. 2, 1985, Raymond wrote to two NSC Asian experts that "Carl Gershman has called concerning a possible grant to the Chinese Alliance for Democracy (CAD). I am concerned about the political dimension to this request. We should not find ourselves in a position where we have to respond to pressure, but this request poses a real problem to Carl.

"Senator [Orrin] Hatch, as you know, is a member of the board. Secondly, NED has already given a major grant for a related Chinese program."

### **Neocon Tag Teams**

From the start, NED became a major benefactor for Freedom House, beginning with a \$200,000 grant in 1984 to build "a network of democratic opinion-makers." In NED's first four years, from 1984 and 1988, it lavished \$2.6 million on Freedom House, accounting for more than one-third of its total income, according to a study by the liberal Council on Hemispheric Affairs that was entitled "Freedom House: Portrait of a Pass-Through."

Over the ensuing three decades, Freedom House has become almost an NED subsidiary, often joining NED in holding policy conferences and issuing position papers, both organizations pushing primarily a neoconservative agenda, challenging countries deemed insufficiently "free," including Syria, Ukraine (in 2014) and Russia.

Indeed, NED and Freedom House often work as a kind of tag-team with NED financing “non-governmental organizations” inside targeted countries and Freedom House berating those governments if they crack down on U.S.-funded NGOs.

For instance, on Nov. 16, 2012, NED and Freedom House joined together to denounce legislation passed by the Russian parliament that required recipients of foreign political money to register with the government.

Or, as NED and Freedom House framed the issue: the Russian Duma sought to “restrict human rights and the activities of civil society organizations and their ability to receive support from abroad. Changes to Russia’s NGO legislation will soon require civil society organizations receiving foreign funds to choose between registering as ‘foreign agents’ or facing significant financial penalties and potential criminal charges.”

Of course, the United States has a nearly identical Foreign Agent Registration Act that likewise requires entities that receive foreign funding and seek to influence U.S. government policy to register with the Justice Department or face possible fines or imprisonment.

But the Russian law would impede NED’s efforts to destabilize the Russian government through funding of political activists, journalists and civic organizations, so it was denounced as an infringement of human rights and helped justify Freedom House’s rating of Russia as “not free.”

Another bash-Putin tag team has been The Washington Post’s editors and NED’s Gershman. On July 28, 2015, a Post editorial and a companion column by Gershman led readers to believe that Putin was paranoid and “power mad” in worrying that outside money funneled into NGOs threatened Russian sovereignty.

The Post and Gershman were especially outraged that the Russians had enacted the law requiring NGOs financed from abroad and seeking to influence Russian policies to register as “foreign agents” and that one of the first funding operations to fall prey to these tightened rules was Gershman’s NED.

The Post’s editors wrote that Putin’s “latest move ... is to declare the NED an ‘undesirable’ organization under the terms of a law that Mr. Putin signed in May [2015]. The law bans groups from abroad who are deemed a ‘threat to the foundations of the constitutional system of the Russian Federation, its defense capabilities and its national security.’

“The charge against the NED is patently ridiculous. The NED’s grantees in Russia last year ran the gamut of civil society. They advocated transparency in public affairs, fought corruption and promoted human rights, freedom of information and freedom of association, among other things. All these activities make for a

healthy democracy but are seen as threatening from the Kremlin's ramparts.

"The new law on 'undesirables' comes in addition to one signed in 2012 that gave authorities the power to declare organizations 'foreign agents' if they engaged in any kind of politics and receive money from abroad. The designation, from the Stalin era, implies espionage."

However, among the relevant points that the Post's editors wouldn't tell their readers was the fact that Russia's Foreign Agent Registration Act was modeled after the American Foreign Agent Registration Act and that NED President Gershman had already publicly made clear – in his Sept. 26, 2013 column – that his goal was to oust Russia's elected president.

In his July 28, 2015 column, Gershman further deemed Putin's government illegitimate. "Russia's newest anti-NGO law, under which the National Endowment for Democracy ... was declared an "undesirable organization" prohibited from operating in Russia, is the latest evidence that the regime of President Vladimir Putin faces a worsening crisis of political legitimacy," Gershman wrote, adding:

"This is the context in which Russia has passed the law prohibiting Russian democrats from getting any international assistance to promote freedom of expression, the rule of law and a democratic political system. Significantly, democrats have not backed down. They have not been deterred by the criminal penalties contained in the 'foreign agents' law and other repressive laws. They know that these laws contradict international law, which allows for such aid, and that the laws are meant to block a better future for Russia."

The reference to how a "foreign agents" registration law conflicts with international law might have been a good place for Gershman to explain why what is good for the goose in the United States isn't good for the gander in Russia. But hypocrisy is a hard thing to rationalize and would have undermined the propagandistic impact of the column.

Also undercutting the column's impact would be an acknowledgement of where NED's money comes from. So Gershman left that out, too. After all, how many governments would allow a hostile foreign power to sponsor politicians and civic organizations whose mission is to undermine and overthrow the existing government and put in someone who would be compliant to that foreign power?

And, if you had any doubts about what Gershman's intent was regarding Russia, he dispelled them in his Friday column in which he calls on the United States to "summon the will" to "contain and defeat this danger," which he makes clear is the continued rule of Vladimir Putin.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com's "[The Victory of Perception Management](#)."]

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](#)).

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## The Dangers from 'Humanitarian' Wars

The West is rushing toward another major war in the Middle East, in Syria, behind the "responsibility to protect" banner, which may justify endless U.S. military interventions, says Conn Hallinan at Foreign Policy in Focus.

By Conn Hallinan

While the mainstream media focuses on losers and winners in the race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, a largely unreported debate is going on over the future course of U.S. diplomacy. Its outcome will have a profound effect on how Washington projects power – both diplomatic and military – in the coming decade.

The issues at stake are hardly abstract. The United States is currently engaged in active wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Somalia. It has deployed troops on the Russian border, played push-and-shove with China in Asia, and greatly extended its military footprint on the [African continent](#). It would not be an exaggeration to say – as former U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry has recently done – that the world is a more dangerous place today than it was during darkest times of the Cold War.

Tracking the outlines of this argument is not easy, in part because the participants are not always forthcoming about what they are proposing, in part because the media oversimplifies the issues.

In its broadest framework, "realists" represented by former National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, Harvard's Steven Walt, and University of Chicago's John Mearsheimer have squared off against "humanitarian interventionists" like current UN Ambassador Samantha Power. Given that Power is a key adviser to the Obama administration on foreign policy and is likely to play a similar role if Clinton is elected, her views carry weight.

In a recent essay in the [New York Review of Books](#), Power asks, "How is a



statesman to advance his nation's interests?" She begins by hijacking the realist position that U.S. diplomacy must reflect "national interests," arguing that they are indistinguishable from "moral values." What happens to people in other countries, she argues, is in our "national security."

Ambassador Power – along with Clinton and former President Bill Clinton – has long been an advocate for "humanitarian intervention," behind which the United States intervened in the Yugoslav civil war. Humanitarian intervention has since been formalized into "responsibility to protect," or R2P, and was the rationale for overthrowing Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. Hillary Clinton has argued forcibly for applying R2P to Syria by setting up "no-fly zones" to block Syrian and Russian planes from bombing insurgents and the civilians under their control.

But Power is proposing something different than humanitarian intervention. She is suggesting that the United States elevate R2P to the level of national security, which sounds uncomfortably like an argument for U.S. intervention in any place that doesn't emulate the American system.

### **Facing Off Against the Kremlin**

Most telling is her choice of examples: Russia, China, and Venezuela, all currently in Washington's crosshairs. Of these, she spends the most time on Moscow and the current crisis in Ukraine, where she accuses the Russians of weakening a "core independent norm" by supporting insurgents in Ukraine's east, "lopping off part of a neighboring country" by seizing Crimea, and suppressing the news of Russian intervention from its own people. Were the Russian media to report on the situation in Ukraine, she writes, "many Russians might well oppose" the conflict.

Power presents no evidence for this statement because none exists. Regardless of what one thinks of Moscow's role in Ukraine, the vast majority of Russians are not only aware of it, but overwhelmingly support President Vladimir Putin on the issue. From the average Russian's point of view, NATO has been steadily marching eastwards since the end of the Yugoslav war. It is Americans who are deployed in the Baltic and Poland, not Russians gathering on the borders of Canada and Mexico. Russians are a tad sensitive about their borders, given the tens of millions they lost in World War II, something of which Power seems oblivious.

What Power seems incapable of doing is seeing how countries like China and Russia view the United States. That point of view is an essential skill in international diplomacy, because it is how one determines whether or not an opponent poses a serious threat to one's national security.

Is Russia – as President Obama recently told the U.N. – really "attempting to

recover lost glory through force,” or is Moscow reacting to what it perceives as a threat to its own national security? Russia did not intervene in Ukraine until the United States and its NATO allies supported the coup against the President Viktor Yanukovich’s government and ditched an agreement that had been hammered out among the European Union, Moscow, and the United States to peacefully resolve the crisis.

Power argues that there was no coup, but U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and the U.S. Ambassador to the Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt were caught on tape talking about how to “mid-wife” the takeover and choose the person they wanted to put in place.

As for “lopping off” Crimea, Power had no problem with the United States and NATO “lopping off” Kosovo from Serbia in the Yugoslav War. In both cases local populations – in Crimea by 96 percent – supported the “takeovers.”

Understanding how other countries see the world does not mean one need agree with them, but there is nothing in Moscow’s actions that suggests that it is trying to re-establish an “empire,” as Obama characterized its behavior in his recent speech to the U.N.

When Hillary Clinton compared Putin to Hitler, she equated Russia with Nazi Germany, which certainly posed an existential threat to our national security. But does anyone think that comparison is valid? In 1939, Germany was the most powerful country in Europe with a massive military. Russia has the 11th largest economy in the world, trailing even France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy and Brazil. Turkey has a larger army.

Power’s view of what is good for the Russian people is a case in point. Although one can hardly admire the oligarchy that dominates Russia – and the last election would seem to indicate considerable voter apathy in the country’s urban centers – the “liberals” whom Power is so enamored with were the people who instituted the economic “shock therapy” in the 1990s that impoverished tens of millions of people and brought about a calamitous drop in life expectancy.

That track record is unlikely to get one elected. In any case, Americans are hardly in a position these days to lecture people about the role oligarchic wealth plays in manipulating elections.

### **View from China**

The Chinese are intolerant of internal dissent, but Washington’s argument with Beijing is over sea lanes, not voter rolls.

China is acting the bully in the South China Sea, but it was President Bill

Clinton who sparked the current tensions in the region when he deployed two aircraft carrier battle groups in the Taiwan Straits in 1995-96 during a tense standoff between Taipei and the mainland. China did not then – and does not now – have the capacity to invade Taiwan, so Beijing's threats were not real.

But the aircraft carriers were very real, and they humiliated – and scared – China in its home waters. That incident directly led to China's current accelerated military spending and its heavy-handed actions in the South China Sea.

Again, there is a long history here. Starting with the Opium Wars of 1839 and 1860, followed by the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and Tokyo's invasion of China in World War II, the Chinese have been invaded and humiliated time and again. Beijing believes that the Obama administration designed its "Asia pivot" as to surround China with U.S. allies.

While that might be an over simplification – the Pacific has long been America's largest market – it is a perfectly rational conclusion to draw from the deployment of U.S. Marines to Australia, the positioning of nuclear-capable forces in Guam and Wake, the siting of anti-ballistic missile systems in South Korea and Japan, and the attempt to tighten military ties with India, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

"If you are a strategic thinker in China, you don't have to be a paranoid conspiracy theorist to think that the U.S. is trying to bandwagon Asia against China," says Simon Tay, chair of the Singapore Institute of International Affairs.

### **Meanwhile in Latin America...**

As for Venezuela, the U.S. supported the 2002 coup against Hugo Chavez and has led a campaign of hostility against the government ever since. For all its problems, the Chavez government cut poverty rates from 54.5 percent of the population to 32 percent, and extreme poverty from around 20 percent to 8.6 percent. Infant mortality fell from 25 per 1,000 to 13 per 1,000, the same as for Black Americans.

And the concern for the democratic rights of Venezuelans apparently doesn't extend to the people of Honduras. When a military coup overthrew a progressive government in 2009, the United States pressed other Latin American countries to recognize the illegal government that took over in its wake. Although opposition forces in Venezuela get tear-gassed and a handful jailed, in Honduras they are murdered by death squads.

Power's view that the United States stands for virtue instead of simply pursuing

its own interests is a uniquely American delusion. "This is an image that Americans have of themselves," says Jeremy Shapiro, research director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, "but is not shared, even by their allies."

The "division" between "realists" and R2P is an illusion. Both end up in the same place: confronting our supposed competitors and supporting our allies, regardless of how they treat their people. Although she is quick to call the Russians in Syria "barbarous," she is conspicuously silent on U.S. support for Saudi Arabia's air war in Yemen, which has targeted hospitals, markets and civilians.

The argument that another country's internal politics is a national security issue for the United States elevates R2P to a new level, sets the bar for military intervention a good deal lower than it is today, and lays the groundwork for an interventionist foreign policy that will make the Obama administration look positively pacifist.

### **Looking Toward November**

It is impossible to separate this debate on foreign policy from the current race for the White House. Clinton has been hawkish on most international issues, and she is not shy about military intervention.

She has also surrounded herself with some of the same people who designed the Iraq war, including founders of the Project for a New American Century. It is rumored that if she wins she will appoint former Defense Department official Michele Flournoy as secretary of defense. Flournoy has called for bombing Assad's forces in Syria.

On the other hand, Trump has been less than coherent. He has made some reasonable statements about cooperating with the Russians and some distinctly scary ones about China. He says he is opposed to military interventions, although he supported the war in Iraq (and now lies about it). He is alarmingly casual about the use of nuclear weapons.

In Foreign Affairs, Stephen Walt, a leading "realist," says that Trump's willingness to consider breaking the nuclear taboo makes him someone who "has no business being commander in chief." Other countries, writes Walt, "are already worried about American power and the ways it gets used. The last thing we need is an American equivalent of the impetuous and bombastic Kaiser Wilhelm II." The Kaiser was a major force behind World War I, a conflict that inflicted 38 million casualties.

Whoever wins in November will face a world in which Washington can't call all

the shots. As Middle East expert Patrick Cockburn points out, “The U.S. remains a superpower, but is no longer as powerful as it once was.” Although it can overthrow regimes it doesn’t like, “it can’t replace what has been destroyed.”

Power’s framework for diplomacy is a formula for a never-ending cycle of war and instability.

**Conn Hallinan can be read at [dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com](http://dispatchesfromtheedgeblog.wordpress.com) and [middlepireseries.wordpress.com](http://middlepireseries.wordpress.com). [This article previously appeared at Foreign Policy in Focus, <http://fpif.org/u-s-diplomacy-dangerous-proposal/>]**

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