

# A Breach in the Anti-Putin Groupthink

The mainstream U.S. media has virtually banned any commentary that doesn't treat Russian President Putin as the devil, but a surprising breach in the groupthink has occurred in Foreign Affairs magazine, reports Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Realistically, no major change in U.S. foreign and defense policy is possible without substantial support from the U.S. political class, but a problem occurs when only one side of a debate gets a fair hearing and the other side gets ignored or marginalized. That is the current situation regarding U.S. policy toward Russia.

For the past couple of decades, only the neoconservatives and their close allies, the liberal interventionists, have been allowed into the ring to raise their gloves in celebration of an uncontested victory over policy. On the very rare occasion when a "realist" or a critic of "regime change" wars somehow manages to sneak into the ring, they find both arms tied behind them and receive the predictable pounding.

While this predicament has existed since the turn of this past century, it has grown more pronounced since the U.S.-Russia relationship slid into open confrontation in 2014 after the U.S.-backed coup in Ukraine overthrowing elected President Viktor Yanukovich and sparking a civil war that led Crimea to secede and join Russia and Ukraine's eastern Donbass region to rise up in rebellion.

But the only narrative that the vast majority of Americans have heard – and that the opinion centers of Washington and New York have allowed – is the one that blames everything on "Russian aggression." Those who try to express dissenting opinions – noting, for instance, the intervention in Ukrainian affairs by Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland as well as the U.S.-funded undermining on Yanukovich's government – have been essentially banned from both the U.S. mass media and professional journals.

When a handful of independent news sites (including Consortiumnews.com) tried to report on the other side of the story, they were denounced as "Russian propagandists" and ended up on "blacklists" promoted by The Washington Post and other mainstream news outlets.

## **An Encouraging Sign**

That is why it is encouraging that Foreign Affairs magazine, the preeminent professional journal of American diplomacy, took the extraordinary step

(extraordinary at least in the current environment) of publishing Robert English's article, entitled "Russia, Trump, and a new Détente," that challenges the prevailing groupthink and does so with careful scholarship.

In effect, English's article trashes the positions of all Foreign Affairs' featured contributors for the past several years. But it must be stressed that there are no new discoveries of fact or new insights that make English's essay particularly valuable. What he has done is to bring together the chief points of the counter-current and set them out with extraordinary writing skills, efficiency and persuasiveness of argumentation. Even more important, he has been uncompromising.

The facts laid out by English could have been set out by one of several experienced and informed professors or practitioners of international relations. But English had the courage to follow the facts where they lead and the skill to convince the Foreign Affairs editors to take the chance on allowing readers to see some unpopular truths even though the editors now will probably come under attack themselves as "Kremlin stooges."

The overriding thesis is summed up at the start of the essay: "For 25 years, Republicans and Democrats have acted in ways that look much the same to Moscow. Washington has pursued policies that have ignored Russian interests (and sometimes international law as well) in order to encircle Moscow with military alliances and trade blocs conducive to U.S. interests. It is no wonder that Russia pushes back. The wonder is that the U.S. policy elite doesn't get this, even as foreign-affairs neophyte Trump apparently does."

English's article goes back to the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s and explains why and how U.S. policy toward Russia was wrong and wrong again. He debunks the notion that Boris Yeltsin brought in a democratic age, which Vladimir Putin undid after coming to power.

English explains how the U.S. meddled in Russian domestic politics in the mid-1990s to falsify election results and ensure Yeltsin's continuation in office despite his unpopularity for bringing on an economic Depression that average Russians remember bitterly to this day. That was a time when the vast majority of Russians equated democracy with "shitocracy."

English describes how the Russian economic and political collapse in the 1990s was exploited by the Clinton administration. He tells why currently fashionable U.S. critics of Putin are dead wrong when they fail to acknowledge Putin's achievements in restructuring the economy, tax collection, governance, improvements in public health and more which account for his spectacular popularity ratings today.

English details all the errors and stupidities of the Obama administration in its handling of Russia and Putin, faulting President Obama and Secretary of State (and later presidential candidate) Hillary Clinton for all of their provocative and insensitive words and deeds. What we see in U.S. policy, as described by English, is the application of double standards, a prosecutorial stance towards Russia, and outrageous lies about the country and its leadership foisted on the American public.

Then English takes on directly all of the paranoia over Russia's alleged challenge to Western democratic processes. He calls attention instead to how U.S. foreign policy and the European Union's own policies in the new Member States and candidate Member States have created all the conditions for a populist revolt by buying off local elites and subjecting the broad populace in these countries to pauperization.

English concludes his essay with a call to give détente with Putin and Russia a chance.

### **Who Is Robert English?**

English's Wikipedia entry and biographical data provided on his University of Southern California web pages make it clear that he has quality academic credentials: Master of Public Administration and PhD. in politics from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. He also has a solid collection of scholarly publications to his credit as author or co-editor with major names in the field of Russian-Soviet intellectual history.

He spent six years doing studies for U.S. intelligence and defense: 1982–1986 at the Department of Defense and 1986-88 at the U.S. Committee for National Security. And he has administrative experience as the Director of the USC School of International Relations.

Professor English is not without his political ambitions. During the 2016 presidential election campaign, he tried to secure a position as foreign policy adviser to Democratic hopeful Sen. Bernie Sanders. In pursuit of this effort, English had the backing of progressives at *The Nation*, which in February 2016 published an article of his entitled "Bernie Sanders, the Foreign Policy Realist of 2016."

English's objective was to demonstrate how wrong many people were to see in Sanders a visionary utopian incapable of defending America's strategic interests. Amid the praise of Sanders in this article, English asserts that Sanders is as firm on Russia as Hillary Clinton.

By the end of the campaign, however, several tenacious neocons had attached themselves to Sanders's inner circle and English departed. So, one might size up English as just one more opportunistic academic who will do whatever it takes to land a top job in Washington.

While there is nothing new in such "flexibility," there is also nothing necessarily offensive in it. From the times of Machiavelli if not earlier, intellectuals have tended to be guns for hire. The first open question is how skilled they are in managing their sponsors as well as in managing their readers in the public. But there is also a political realism in such behavior, advancing a politician who might be a far better leader than the alternatives while blunting the attack lines that might be deployed against him or her.

Then, there are times, such as the article for Foreign Affairs, when an academic may be speaking for his own analysis of an important situation whatever the political costs or benefits. Sources who have long been close to English assure me that the points in his latest article match his true beliefs.

### **The Politics of Geopolitics**

Yet, it is one thing to have a courageous author and knowledgeable scholar. It is quite another to find a publisher willing to take the heat for presenting views that venture outside the mainstream Establishment. In that sense, it is stunning that Foreign Affairs chose to publish English and let him destroy the groupthink that has dominated the magazine and the elite foreign policy circles for years.

The only previous exception to the magazine's lockstep was an article by University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer entitled "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault" published in September 2014. That essay shot holes in Official Washington's recounting of the events leading up to the Russian annexation of Crimea and intervention in the Donbass.

It was a shock to many of America's leading foreign policy insiders who, in the next issue, rallied like a collection of white cells to attack the invasive thinking. But there were some Foreign Affairs readers – about one-third of the commenters – who voiced agreement with Mearsheimer's arguments. But that was a one-time affair. Mearsheimer appears to have been tolerated because he was one of the few remaining exponents of the Realist School in the United States. But he was not a Russia specialist.

Foreign Affairs may have turned to Robert English because the editors, as insider-insiders, found themselves on the outside of the Trump administration looking in. The magazine's 250,000 subscribers, which include readers from

across the globe, expect Foreign Affairs to have some lines into the corridors of power.

In that regard, the magazine has been carrying water for the State Department since the days of the Cold War. For instance, in the spring issue of 2007, the magazine published a cooked-up article signed by Ukrainian politician Yuliya Tymoshenko on why the West must contain Russia, a direct response to Putin's famous Munich speech in which he accused the United States of destabilizing the world through the Iraq War and other policies.

Anticipating Hillary Clinton's expected election, Foreign Affairs' editors did not hedge their bets in 2016. They sided with the former Secretary of State and hurled rhetorical bricks at Donald Trump. In their September issue, they compared him to a tin-pot populist dictator in South America.

Thus, they found themselves cut off after Trump's surprising victory. For the first time in many years in the opening issue of the New Year following a U.S. presidential election, the magazine did not feature an interview with the incoming Secretary of State or some other cabinet member.

Though Official Washington's anti-Russian frenzy seems to be reaching a crescendo on Capitol Hill with strident hearings on alleged Russian meddling in the presidential election, the underlying reality is that the neocons are descending into a fury over their sudden loss of power.

The hysteria was highlighted when neocon Sen. John McCain lashed out at Sen. Rand Paul after the libertarian senator objected to special consideration for McCain's resolution supporting Montenegro's entrance into NATO. In a stunning breach of Senate protocol, a livid McCain accused Paul of "working for Vladimir Putin."

Meanwhile, some Democratic leaders have begun cautioning their anti-Trump followers not to expect too much from congressional investigations into the supposed Trump-Russia collusion on the election.

In publishing Robert English's essay challenging much of the anti-Russian groupthink that has dominated Western geopolitics over the past few years, Foreign Affairs may be finally bending to the recognition that it is risking its credibility if it continues to put all its eggs in the we-hate-Russia basket.

That hedging of its bets may be a case of self-interest, but it also may be an optimistic sign that the martyred Fifteenth Century Catholic Church reformer Jan Hus was right when he maintained that eventually the truth will prevail.

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*Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015.

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