

# “Everything That We Have Done Since 9/11 Is Wrong”

“Everything that we have done since 9/11 is wrong,” says retired Army JAG Major Todd Pierce, whose personal journey to that conclusion helps explain why so many ex-military people are growing disillusioned with U.S. foreign policy.

Philip Weiss of Mondoweiss was curious how Todd Pierce, a military man from Minnesota, became a critic of what looks increasingly like America’s permanent warfare, so Weiss interviewed Pierce in a two-part [in-depth interview](#), which we received permission to republish at Consortiumnews.com. (This is Part One)

Philip Weiss: Tell me about your background.

Todd Pierce: I was born in Princeton, Minnesota, in 1951. My mother had grown up on a farm and her family background was Swedish immigrant and Scottish immigrant. My father was from Iowa. One uncle of his had been the minister to China during the Boxer rebellion, Edwin Conger. His wife kept all her correspondence, and it became a source book for the Boxer rebellion.

Something that shaped my thinking was my father was in the Bataan death march. He got released in 1945, by U.S. Army Rangers and Filipino guerrillas. They were rescued from the Japanese in a heroic raid. I knew of this through his mother my grandmother. He didn’t talk about it. So after 3 years he got released from that prisoner of war camp under conditions every bit as hard as a concentration camp, and five years later he had come to Princeton and he married my mother. And he became certified as a highway engineer for the state of Minnesota.

PW: How did the Bataan death march affect him?

TP: He had been through these atrocities. He did have PTSD as we call it now after the war. As one of his letters points out, he had been in the place where 30,000 Filipinos had been killed and 15,000 Americans. Then in the next letter to my aunt, he said, “Please forgive me for mentioning that, I was in a down mood that day.” He never mentioned those kinds of things again. He’d seen the worst you could see, and 3 years later he was living a normal life.

He married my mother. Then my mother came down with rheumatic fever three years later. She was in deteriorating condition thereafter till she died in 1958. My brother, my sister and I lived with my two different grandmothers for a couple of years, and then my father remarried, and we lived in St Paul all five of us. But I had been living with my grandparents on the farm. I preferred to go back

to Princeton and the farm. One reason, I was given much more freedom there, which wasn't to my benefit. And I had a very unremarkable education career.

My grandfather was a very independent guy, he stood up for things. He was your typical Scots-Irish guy, and I got a lot of things good from him in that way. But that side of the family didn't place any emphasis on education. So remarkably I was able to get through high school without doing any work and missing a lot of school, and graduated.

PW: Your teachers must have told you you were smart.

TP: It was registered. I'm not saying that to flatter myself. They would remind me, you could do more, you could go to college. Growing up on that side of the family, it wasn't that I didn't have ambition, but I thought what could I do without going to college—perhaps be an electrician. That was the extent of my ambition at that time. If it had seemed a realistic choice when I was in high school, I would have wanted to get a PhD in political science. That was always my interest. But by that time, it was already, "Yeah, there are no jobs for this."

I got out of high school, came down and got a job in a factory in Minneapolis. Lamar, it was a hairspray factory, and worked there for about 6 months. So I had a pretty unimpressive career. First in that hairspray factory, then working for General Tire, putting tires on cars in Minneapolis

PW: When did you go into the military?

TP: I had enlisted in the Marines in high school in 1969 with the intent of going into the infantry. I look back and shudder at my poor judgment. But I failed my physical because I hurt my back that winter before going in. So I put that aside. But it was like I had unfinished business, I wanted to get into the Marines, to finish what I had started. The Vietnam War was going on, and I had turned against it at that time. But my uncle and my dad had been in World War II and been willing to step forward to defend the country, and I had that embedded in me coming from where I was. I ended up going to the Marine reserve, then going to work as a plasterer when I came back. I didn't like working in factories.

So I went to Marine Corps boot camp, but I quickly tired of going to drill once a month and getting my hair short. I thought of going active duty but the Marine first division officially came back from Vietnam and so there were a lot of excess people on the base at Camp Pendleton, painting rocks.

I ended up going into the National Guard reserves and going back to Princeton, and for ten years I did farming and construction. I did plastering and cement

work. And I was pretty good at reading blueprints. Not everyone in construction can do that. And from that time till I was 30, I was always involved in farming.

PW: Do you know how to milk a cow.

TP: Yes. I milked cows. I was a milkhauler, I picked up livestock to take to the stockyards. Did fieldwork, plowing, discing, combining, haybaling. And I'd say that farming does imprint a view of the world. It's not a forgiving lifestyle. It's black and white, a life of absolutes. If you don't do something, something bad will generally follow. If you don't get out and milk your cows, your cows will get sick.

PW: Did the '70s affect you?

TP: The counterculture was always there. My friends were hippies. And beginning in the late 60s, I was a reader of Ramparts magazine and Hunter Thompson. I was part of the counterculture. My friends who were hippies— we always were interested but were relatively uneducated and just searching. But later I was working in New Mexico and I hung out with grad students—reading books and philosophy, and discussing things. That was my first real experience amongst a more intellectual atmosphere.

PW: Did you have any awareness of Israel?

TP: Virtually none. Though let me say my stepsister who I wasn't close to had married an Iraqi student from the Colorado School of Mines. She lived in Denver. He was studying petroleum engineering. And honestly our family was entirely Israeli oriented. Because when the 1967 war broke out, he was buying a car, and the salesman said something anti-Arab, and he got mad about it. And our family was—you know, he was an Arab, but our sympathies were with Israel.

PW: Did you have sympathy for him?

TP: Sympathy for him, yes. But not putting ourselves in his place and thinking about it. We were very typical Americans. We had Israeli-centric eyes.

PW: But you were against the Vietnam War?

TP: In '67, I was 16 years old, and I was pro-Vietnam War at that point. I was reading a lot of books like The Green Berets [1965]. I was looking at it from an American perspective, this is part of counter insurgency. And with the '67 war, I thought that Israel is our ally and the Arabs are aligned with the Soviet Union. And that was a deciding factor in how I looked at things.

I always was anti-totalitarian from the youngest age. That goes to my dad's experience. And that interest in World War II also extended to Germany, and one

of the first books I read when I started reading more history was Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*— the kid's version of the Third Reich. And it was the time of the Cold War, so I came across things like the Hungarian Revolution and East Germany and the Berlin wall. So I was anti-totalitarian from the youngest age.

And though I turned against the Vietnam War, unlike some of my friends, who were having the prevailing attitude that if we're wrong, the other side must be right, I never defended the Vietnamese either. I was anti-communist. But for a variety of reasons, I turned against the war from an American perspective. "Why are we there?"

PW: What about education?

TP: I started taking night classes at junior college. And construction was always up and down, and during one of the low periods [...] I was able to get an internship because of my construction experience. So that was where I got interested in computers.

And I decided to go in the army reserve and become a computer programmer. Now when I left the National Guard a few years earlier, I said, "Never again." I will be honest with you, I didn't care for regimentation. But this was the only way someone would pay me to go to school.

And Stewart Brand who was part of the counterculture said, "The Vietnam War is over, people should consider going in the military and getting training in computers." I thought, "Yeah." So countercultural ideas, the good ones, have always had some influence.

Later I came to know Ken Babbs who, along with his partner Ken Kesey, you could say were the originators of the hippie movement. And I told Ken Babbs, "Blame it on Stewart Brand, or give him credit for me going in the military, however you want to look at it."

PW: Is Babbs still around?

TP: Yes, he's in Eugene, Oregon. How I got acquainted with him— in [the book] *Electric Kool Aid Acid Test* [author] Tom Wolfe asks this guy, who's a Vietnam Vet, what was it like, and Babbs pointed to a pile of papers in the corner. "There it is, read all about it." It was a manuscript for a book on Vietnam. That manuscript got lost, not surprisingly, perhaps, and years later, in 2010, 2011, the story goes, a friend of Babbs sent him a copy of the manuscript that he didn't realize was out there. And Babbs and his wife produced a book called *Who Shot the Water Buffalo*. That was when I was a defense counsel with military commissions. And trying to bring in a better understanding of how we fought our

wars. So I contacted Babbs, and being a Guantanamo defense attorney, that was my introduction, and we started corresponding, and he later invited me out to a visit.

PW: Was that a good book?

TP: Here's a point— let me fill this out. Babbs was one of the first American military service members in Vietnam. He was sent there as a Marine helicopter pilot before the war heated up, and then when he was there the war started heating up. I asked him in an oral history, what were his ideas once he got there. Did you think the war could be won? He said, No, I knew almost right away that war could not be won. I was taking Marines out on patrol, and even in those early years they would just pretend to be out on patrol because they didn't want to get too far away and not get back to the helicopter to pick them up. So they were already shirking their duty, because they didn't want to put their lives on the line for what they already knew was a lost cause.

PW: They knew that the people didn't want them there.

TP: Yes.

PW: How political were you then?

TP: In 1983 I got hired as a computer technician in the active duty reserve program, and I was on active duty for almost 10 years. And during that time, that's when I got more politically interested and began spending a lot of time in the library. And I will admit that I became a neoconservative. I had been a liberal through the 70s, then came the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. And it just seemed like something is wrong here. I was a blue collar Reagan Democrat at that time, though I didn't like Reagan. I may have even have voted for John Anderson. I forget, but I was leaning more to the right at that time. As did a lot of people.

This is when the guerrilla war was heating up with El Salvador and Nicaragua. And being anti-totalitarian and anti-communist, I wasn't a right winger, I was a social democrat type you could say, but there had been some Nicaraguan Sandinistas who had broken off, and one of them was a former nun from southern Minnesota. She had been married to a Sandinista, but as the government became more Leninist he became disaffected and left the country.

And another guy was studying for a doctorate in Iowa who was a former Sandinista. He had actively supported the revolution when he had been in Europe, he was very knowledgeable about liberation theology. And Minnesota was a hotbed for support for the Sandinistas, with the Socialist Workers Party playing a large role. My interest was always in ideologies, revolutionary ideologies.

PW: You weren't on that team?

TP: No. I was against Trotsky and against Stalin and on the other team. I was coming from the liberal critical side toward Communism, and I got more involved in my reading, and I got acquainted with a person here who would remain a neoconservative, an attorney, who had gotten involved because of the involvement of the pro-Sandinista side at her Lutheran church. She didn't think she was getting the fullest picture. We joined forces. I was also talking to a number of different professors who had opinion pieces in the papers consistent with my own. And I met an IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] officer then teaching at the University of Minnesota. Some friends introduced me. If I had a political mentor then, it was this IDF officer.

PW: Would you take the same stance today vis-a-vis the Sandinistas, given the left-wing crowd you're in?

TP: I don't apologize for being anti-Sandinista. The people who interested me were the critics from the left side criticizing the Leninism. I was talking about the influence in global education of a pro-Sandinista point of view without any opposing viewpoint. That was the issue. There didn't seem to be a counter narrative. I wasn't interested because of a kneejerk pro-American perspective.

PW: But your left-wing friends in New York, the late Michael Ratner and Michael Smith, this would be a real difference between you.

TP: They would have been on a different side. And like I say, I would remain anti-Sandinista today, but today, I would be against interventionism. Someone I am friends with now is David MacMichael, he worked with the CIA at various levels. He's a member of the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity group, which Ray McGovern and a few others started in opposition to the Iraq War. MacMichael is elderly now, and he's much more on the left today than he would have been in the 50s and 60s. In the 80s he served as an expert witness for the Sandinista government in a lawsuit against the United States. And when I worked in military commissions I got acquainted with Paul Reichler, co-counsel for Nicaragua in that lawsuit. So talk about coming full circle.

I would respectfully disagree. I remain anti-totalitarian. That's why I am doing what I am doing today. That's why I volunteered to defend Guantanamo defendants. Because we had adopted the same techniques I had spent my life in opposition to.

When 9/11 came, almost immediately when we picked up people in Afghanistan and Bush and Cheney were saying, "They don't get the protection of the Geneva Conventions," my position is, "No, that's wrong." I had the experience of my dad

in my background, and I said, "Wait a minute, this is what we used to accuse communist regimes of doing, violating human rights, etcetera. It's no more right when we're doing it than it was back when I was in opposition to the Sandinistas."

PW: How long were you a neocon?

TP: One of the professors I knew referred me to the National Association of Scholars, which was started by Herb London and Steve Balch, both of New York, and I got involved with them. Balch said, "Why don't you start a state chapter of the Minnesota Association of Scholars." That was 1987. And our first issue that we took a stand on was a call for a more balanced approach on global education.

In this period of time, I also got acquainted with the Institute on Religion and Democracy. All the neocons! And I got acquainted with Peter Collier and David Horowitz. I was arranging for various people to come into the state and speak at colleges. And I also got acquainted with Michael Ledeen's wife, Barbara Ledeen, who had worked with a group that sponsored Horowitz and Collier.

One guy I met in the association of scholars, I won't name names, but he was known as a Straussian at Carleton, and in our first meeting getting this association together he said, "Where do you teach?" He figured I must have been a professor. I broke the news, "I don't even have a college degree." I was putting on a good act.

PW: What was your religious training, and had you met Jews?

TP: We were very irreligious in my family. We went through the formality of getting confirmed in the Lutheran church, but just like in school, I didn't go to confirmation very much. My neighbor wrote my confirmation report. At the end of ninth grade, we had to meet every morning for a week with the pastor to prepare for confirmation and then write a five-page paper. I went the first day and didn't go the rest of the week. I talked to the pastor, and he said, well, if you get the paper in we'll confirm you. So my neighbor wrote the paper. I don't know how I persuaded her. I couldn't tell you what it was on.

The only Jews I knew were a local grocer, who would drive up from Minneapolis every day. He and his brother had a dry goods and grocery store, named Mark's.

PW: They were hardworking guys?

TP: Yes they were, and they gave credit, which farmers needed.

PW: What about anti-Jewish prejudice?

TP: None, that I was aware of. Minneapolis, according to The Mary Tyler Moore Show, had antisemitism, but it just wasn't an issue where I grew up. We liked these guys, we shopped there, they were always friendly. My grandmother liked them. I got to know Aaron, he was a real character, with a lot of jokes, he could have been on the comedian circuit. His brother Bert was older and a little bit more reserved.

PW: Now you were meeting them professionally. Were you thinking, "Wow, these are Jews?"

TP: No, it wasn't the way I thought. I thought, "This IDF officer, he knows something about war and politics."

PW: You told me your ideas really started to change with the Gulf War.

TP: Right. August 2, 1990 came along with the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. I believe that was a Saturday, and our unit had a mission to the Mideast, as theater area material management center. They said right away, "We'll be mobilized for this." I was a very patriotic person. I supported the Gulf War. But it also opened my eyes to how corrupt things were.

PW: How was that?

TP: Just the way things were done. We got mobilized to Fort Polk [Louisiana] in September. Then to Saudi Arabia beginning of October. The first thing we got told was, "You will be here at least a year." And I was told to train someone in the computer job, because the computer was going to be left in Saudi Arabia.

The US Army wanted to be in the Middle East. Even before we left Baton Rouge, I was told that my computer, the computer I was the sole technician for, would not be coming back. They weren't going to see what Saddam Hussein would do, they had their opening to get into the Middle East.

This particular computer I maintained, maintained all the ammo stockages in the theater; any ammo that came into the theater was digitally inventoried on the computer and allocated. So it was sort of an inside view of what was being done at a high level of command. And like I say, it opened my eyes to how things really worked in the military.

PW: Why did they want to be in Saudi Arabia?

TP: To me at the time, but more with hindsight—it was that yeah, the United States wanted to get more involved, more directly in the Middle East. We were already propping up the Saudi regime in a variety of ways. And Osama bin Laden, one of the complaints he had was that the United States was in Saudi Arabia.

When you break that down, the complaint was about the United States propping up the Saudi regime, which was corrupt and keeping most of the wealth for themselves in the Saudi family. When you got there, you could see that first hand. I'd go for a walk, and you could see a palace there and the rest of the people largely in poverty.

We got there in October, and most of the units were out of there by May. But because we had a permanent mission there we were still there and I don't know when they planned on getting us out. But the people from Baton Rouge and Arkansas said, "When are we getting out of here," and they started calling congressional members, saying, "The war is over." And about May they said, "We're going to keep part of the unit here, and send the rest back to Baton Rouge, and we'll continue the mission."

But what was the mission? The war was over, so what was the mission? The mission was to plant the United States in the Middle East, with a remnant here in Saudi Arabia.

I got out of there only because a regular army soldier wanted to stay there, a computer technician. So he transferred to our unit and he stayed there. We left part of the unit there in the Khobar towers. I helped them move in. It was giant apartment complex. Like the projects in Chicago.

PW: Did that make you cynical?

TP: That was where I really became cynical in a whole lot of ways, both at the micro level—officers having adulterous affairs and having a motive to stay there, with one another, and I'm being careful not to name names, but high ranking officers, who were actually lobbying to keep us there, because they didn't have a financial interest in going back, plus they had their mistress there. It was the lower level people suffering in various ways financially, and this was before cell phones; phone calls home were expensive, and they were trying to maintain contact with their families.

PW: People have had affairs in the command before.

TP: No, that's not new at all. It happens at every level in the military. Not just the adulterous affairs, but more just the conflict that goes with it, and how that works out personnel wise. I didn't worry about who was having sex with who, but rather what consequences that had for me and the other soldiers. You see people getting promoted faster and what not.

PW: What about the macro level?

TP: That computer is probably still there. Rusting now that things are updated.

But they were setting up a system of logistic bases. They had already started one in Saudi Arabia, then they had another base in Kuwait, where they launched the war in 2003. We were putting a stranglehold on Iraq from the very beginning of the end of the Gulf War.

PW: Whose plan was that?

TP: I have to believe that we were doing it from the time we left. From the highest level. George H.W. Bush and Cheney, they had exhibited some prudence in not invading Iraq at the time, but at the same time they were exercising total control over Iraq in a variety of ways.

Let me throw in one other thing here, very quickly. I came back and I got a promotion and a job down in Fort McCoy [in Wisconsin]. I was applying to law school at the time, and fulfilling the requirements by getting a four year degree. And I entered Hamline Law School in 1993, at age 42.

But that experience in Fort McCoy made me even more cynical. The way the commanders were. Again, adultery. Which is there everywhere you go. But the personality of the commander was very controlling. I got down there and I'm hearing right away from enlisted men and officers, "Don't say a word, don't question anything." And every week they had a meeting with the commander who would talk, and the second week, a captain raised a question, "Why isn't this being done?" The people around me were whispering, "He'll be gone in a week." And sure enough, the next week he was shipped out to a less desirable place.

PW: How did you go from law school to becoming a JAG?

TP: My goals were modest. I wasn't looking for a large law firm partnership or anything. My goal was just to be a prosecutor in a medium-sized Minnesota county where I live. I was more of a law and order guy.

But when I was finishing law school, [a former army colleague] had become commander of the legal support unit for an army reserve unit. And by that time I had joined the army psyops [Psychological Operations] unit as a reservist, one weekend a month, as a noncommissioned officer, but that unit was being disbanded so I called him up and I said, "Do you have any positions?" He did and said, "I can't promise you but I might get you a commission as a JAG..." [T]he paperwork went in and I got the commission. So then I became a JAG. I got commissioned in 1996 and I was 45 years old.

Meantime, I applied to be a judicial law clerk in St Cloud, with a judge. I got hired by him, and it was fortuitous, we were very compatible in outlook. He was a state judge, very senior, appointed by a Democrat. In the course of working for him, I won't give you too many details, but my outlook shifted, after I saw

a couple of cops testifying falsely on a couple of cases. I thought, "Yeah, there's a place for the defense more than I appreciated before." My sympathies shifted. I remained more conservative at that point. But conservative in the idea that, "No, you got to have the defense and defend these civil liberties."

That was a transformational experience. We had a few cops come in, and a cop was lying. This cop who was investigating false allegations became involved with the alleged victim's mother, and you read the police report and the thing just fell apart. And the charge was very serious: a charge of sexual conduct with a 15 year old girl. The case was filled with inconsistencies, and I persuaded the judge to dismiss the charges. No judge wants to dismiss a charge of criminal sexual conduct involving a 16 year old girl, because it is going to get a lot of attention. But I went back to him three times.

The charges were against the mother's new husband. They'd met in a nudist camp. He had a pension as a teacher, and the daughter never liked the guy. I don't blame her, but she made the allegation of sexual contact, and the story rang false for a lot of reasons. The cop had gotten in an affair with the mother. I persuaded the judge, this is inherently incredible, it couldn't be true. It took three times to convince the judge and he dismissed the charge.

The judge said, "Yeah, go ahead and write up an order dismissing the charge, but make it very careful and make it bulletproof." And I did. And that was later vindicated by the prosecution and the police.

PW: What effect did that have on you?

TP: Well it added another layer of cynicism.

PW: Our conversation began with you saying the foreign policy positions of the Democrats and Republicans are fascistic. That's a strong statement. Do you think that in this belief, with your long ideological history, that you have a romance about when America was good?

TP: I have a yin and yang view. Yeah, there's much that's good about America and relatively speaking in the course of human events and history, we are often exactly as we have held ourselves up to be. We did break ground in opening up more freedom for the world. But at the same time we were committing genocide [through] constant warfare against the indigenous people. Which cannot be denied and cannot be legitimized, or justified.

PW: How are we doing in terms of those freedoms?

TP: Many people could argue that at any point in our history we really were hypocritical because of the way we treated indigenous people. And you can make

an argument that every war we had, even the revolutionary war, was driven by economic self-interest, but again, it brought about good outcomes. We were always on an imperialistic course with manifest destiny and subjugating the indigenous people. And you can't justify that and you can't defend it in a moral sense. But we really took that to a higher level with the Spanish American war, where we become a global imperialist and joined the other imperialist powers. My great-great uncle was part of that, as a minister to China. But even then it was always mixed. John Quincy Adams said we don't go abroad to slay dragons or tyrants, but we stay at home. Like any country you have schizophrenic political attitudes.

So how do you measure our achievement? In the long term, I guess you have to measure by what we brought about in human rights.

But I think it's like we hit a peak and now we're on a downhill side. Now human rights has become a pretext to go to war and to use as a weapon against other countries, not equally against despotic regimes, but selectively at whoever we want to target.

It goes to Hannah Arendt's point about totalitarian foreign policy, which I take to be a fundamental principle of fascism, and as others have written, fascism, contrary to what some will say— what's a fascist regime, and they get into minutiae, what did Mussolini do. While more astute observers point out that fascism is what fascism does. Even if we don't have anybody speaking Italian to us doesn't mean that we can't be fascist.

And fascism is a national manifestation, so every country is going to have its own cultural form of it. We're seeing an American form of it, particularly in the political conventions. Last night [at the Democratic Convention], some antiwar protester said, "No more war," and they were drowned out with people chanting, "USA, USA."

They didn't treat them any different at the Democratic one from the Republican. This morning, Joe Scarborough said, "You know the Democrats have gotten rid of their Vietnam syndrome." They're back in full warfare mode. They're just triumphant. There's a satisfaction that both parties are united on their foreign policy. No more of this antiwar dissent, or Democrats apologizing for what we're doing. We finally silenced the antiwar left. There's a triumphalism being expressed.

PW: St. Cloud led where?

TP: I learned there was an active reserve JAG officer opening at Fort Snelling [in Minneapolis]. I thought, "I have to apply and see what happens." I got

hired. I went on active duty in 1998, as again an active Army Reserve JAG officer. About the same time the Kosovo War was beginning, and in large part coming out of the Gulf War, I had become anti-interventionist, to give him his due credit, partly under Pat Buchanan's influence. He was making the argument, the Cold War is over, get the peace dividend, it's time to come home, America, invest in the United States, lower the defense budget. I'd been anti-communist and anti-Soviet, but I wasn't militaristic.

So, I was very much in line with that. I had already had two indications through the military of our real long term goals in foreign policy. Being told our computer would stay in the Middle East, then seeing how we ramped up our logistics bases there. Then when I was in the psyops unit, during training, our commander came to us one day and said, "You know, if you guys are thinking your mission is going to be reduced, you're wrong." We had just come back from the Gulf conflict. "We're actually going to be doing more things around the world on these psyops missions." That was probably 1993 or 1994. [...] And bear in mind, the psyops are mainly in the army reserve. The way it's set up, they don't need that many people on hand except during a war. So when a war breaks out that, they need psyops and they've got them all ready in the Reserve.

Also when I was undergoing that psyops training, down at Fort Bragg, one of the instructors was a master sergeant who had been in Iraq during the Gulf War, and she was up in the Kurdish area after the war, and she and a captain had nothing to do, they were twiddling their thumbs— and this goes to show the incompetence of the military and the lack of sound reasoning—her and this captain were up there as psyops working with the Kurds. They're supposed to be helping them get food, and they decide, well, we need to do something in line with psyops, so they started preparing this propaganda message, Rise up against Saddam Hussein.

And she hated the Kurds because they did exactly what they'd asked them to do. The Kurds in the north rose up and got decimated by Saddam's forces. And she just couldn't contain herself, [...] she hated the Kurds, because they'd actually listened to her. I presume she got some kind of rebuke for it officially.

PW: That was in the news, right?

TP: There was another rebellion in the south. That was driven by George H.W. Bush. [He] made some statements that encouraged southern Iraqis, the Shiites to rise up, the so called Marsh Arabs. She was up in the Kurdish area, and I'm just relying on her anecdote here, but according to this person who would have been a senior NCO, on her own, she and this other officer incited the Kurds to rise up and rebel. She hated the Kurds, because she didn't care about the Kurds getting killed as a result—and I'm guessing but she probably got in a little bit of trouble, maybe a reprimand, for an ad hoc psyops campaign. But she didn't get

too severe a reprimand, because she was working as a senior instructor.

They succeeded in inciting them to rebel, but she didn't want them really to rebel. They were just doing that because "Hey— this is what we do." It was just a gross dereliction.

PW: What was next for you?

TP: I got off active duty in November 2002 as they were ramping up for the Iraq war. And I took a job as assistant county attorney in Fillmore County, in southeastern Minnesota, in February 2003, then I left in April 2004 and started working at the Minnesota secretary of state's office, and worked there till March 2008.

Then I went on active duty for Guantanamo in June 2008.

PW: Did you elect to do that?

TP: Yes, I volunteered. Again, going back to the very beginning stage of the global war on terror, they said, "We're not going to recognize the Geneva Conventions." I was on active duty then. I opposed that, and I opposed the Iraq war.

PW: What does that mean to oppose the war inside the military?

TP: There was a senior NCO who put up a sign, No war in Iraq, in her yard. And someone saw that and reported her. They were looking at punishing her. It never made it into the papers. That put me in a quandary, because they wanted to have punitive action against her, and I'm trying to recall if it ever got to the stage where I had to say yes or no. I opposed any action. And I had very good relations with the general. I would have told him not to do anything.

PW: Where were you on 9/11?

TP: I was on active duty as a JAG officer. I went into work that morning. And our staff was small, me and a lieutenant colonel, and he routinely would come in late. And that day he didn't come in till 2 or 3 o'clock, which I won't say anything more about. It was all happening when I got to work, and the second plane hit and we knew it was terrorism, and so we began wrapping up immediately our command, because we were responsible for all the Reserve units in six states. Also we knew people were being mobilized almost immediately. I was in on all the discussions because the more senior guy hadn't shown up yet. And you could just see the hysteria taking hold of a lot of people.

Then at the end of the day, late in the day, because we worked late, finally my senior officer arrives, so I can go home, and I picked up my son [from school in

Minneapolis] so we could go home, and see my stepson who was back from the Marines on leave. He'd been in a year and a half, and I was anxious to see him. And there was a huge traffic jam. And finally we got north, and we came to an overpass, and there was a guy on the overpass with a kid waving a flag. He backed the traffic up five miles because everyone honked a horn and slowed down a bit. It was something like after Pearl Harbor. But I was ticked off. I wanted to get home and see my stepson.

The next night— the same thing. The guy was out there again with a flag. The third night, I pulled over. I had my uniform on, and I said, "Hey you're backing up traffic for ten miles. You've done this now for a couple days, we get it." He said, "I just want to show my support." I said, "I'm in the military, I want to get home, you're doing a disservice to me."

The guy was out there again the next night. I called the highway patrol. I said, "Look, I understand free expression, but backing up traffic? Can you at least suggest that he stop?" But they said, "Oh no, we can't."

Fortunately, he wasn't out there after the weekend.

PW: Why wasn't it freedom of expression?

TP: It was hysteria. Immediately— out came this outpouring. He was patriotic, but again to me, sitting out there—he was backing traffic up for miles. I never criticized anyone's patriotism, though we could get on to a different topic, of how it's become hyper-militarism.

PW: Where else did you see the hysteria?

TP: Just watching my fellow officers. They were changing before our very eyes. "We have to go to war, we have to start killing people." Then it all started. Picking people up with no Geneva Conventions.

PW: But what were your feelings on 9/11? I remember myself that day. I said, "I'd go after those bastards."

TP: Absolutely. Remember, I was still inclined to be hawkish. I was non-interventionist but I was still hawkish, and I said, "We got to go after the guys who are behind this." I had no doubt about that. I was mobilizing troops and I was fully in support of these guys. But let's do it right. Let's do it legally. I was going back to all my time having an interest in guerrilla war and how do you deal with it. When you start acting outside the law, when you act hypocritically, you are aiding the enemy. This is a fundamental principle of counter insurgency, which we've never followed in spite of Petraeus's talk. You're aiding the enemy.

Hey, we're doing everything wrong. Almost from the beginning we did everything wrong. We went into Afghanistan— yeah, hunt down Al Qaeda, the perpetrators. Then it turned into removing the Taliban. The Taliban aren't terrorists. The Taliban may be horrible people, they are not terrorists. You can't expand the war.

Then it expanded to Iraq. Even at the beginning, they were talking about Iraq. So everything we have done is wrong and has led to the creation and expansion of ISIS. We brought it into existence by our own policies.

PW: Did you ever say this to Michael Ratner? He used to say the same thing.

TP: I said it frequently on an email list I was on with him. I remember he responded to me when I talked about martial law— that these principles, if we follow them, are a threat to our civil liberties and political dissent.

PW: That was happening in the Vietnam days?

TP: The military wanted to do it. I went in and did quite a bit of research on Westmoreland and these guys. I read this book *On Strategy*, which is a mimicry of Clausewitz's book, *On War*. It pretended to be taking Clausewitz's thought and applying it to Vietnam. In fact, Clausewitz said the strongest form of warfare is defensive. He was writing as a Prussian national, in opposition to Napoleon's invasion, and he said, "Stay at home, defend your country, don't go out on offensive operations." And in this book *On Strategy*, Podhoretz turned that upside down. The book is by Harry Summers, but Podhoretz is listed. There's a section on the offensive. How the offensive is a stronger form of war, and as a footnote, Podhoretz is given as an authority for that, not Clausewitz, who said the opposite.

Clausewitz's book wasn't popular with the Germans because Clausewitz also said you need to have civilian leadership making the decisions on war, because the military is more narrow minded. So the German military almost immediately reinterpreted Clausewitz's book, and that's how it's handed down to the Americans.

The point of Colonel Harry Summers's book, *On Strategy*, was we would have won the Vietnam War had our will not been diminished by the antiwar movement and the press. I had actually adopted that view a bit in the '80s myself. Till becoming sober again. But the press had been targeted as the enemy, for having reported the news. In the course of our argument on the right to know, I read these memoirs by Generals Davidson and Westmoreland and Admiral Sharpe. They were all in agreement that the press lost the war for us, the antiwar movement. Davidson and Sharpe said for the next war, we got to have military detention and

ensorship. Basically, we got to bring back the martial law we had during the Civil War and in Hawaii during the World War, which they had all been familiar with.

In Hawaii, they needed Japanese-Americans as a work force, so they didn't have the mass removal. They had martial law. I went to the museum in Hawaii. They had signs, imposing censorship. And that's what these Vietnam-era generals would have known all about [...], and they were advocating that for the Vietnam War. It's unconstitutional, so it's difficult to do, but the military internalized this way of thinking, so they've been coming up with these ways of basically suppressing news and information ever since.

PW: How long did you serve as a Guantanamo defense attorney?

TP: I began June 2008, and it actually continues to this day. I'm still on a case before the DC Court of Appeals, we're still waiting on a decision.

PW: How many guys have you met at Guantanamo?

TP: At Guantanamo itself, I have only met one client, one prisoner [Ibrahim] al-Qosi. The appellate case I'm still on, he would never meet with us. Though one time, to the surprise of my co-counsel, he agreed to meet; and it was my co-counsel who was down there, so they met and actually they ended up talking throughout the day. His name is [Ali Hamza] al-Bahlul. He told my co-counsel, "I want to give you a message to send to your president." The guards wouldn't let him bring in his pen and notebook for some random reason, but he had a MacDonald's coffee cup, and al-Bahlul twisted the lid of the coffee cup to use as a stylus and etched his message into the styrofoam. "Stop waging war on us and we'll stop fighting back."

It's clear all the time, what is their motivation. We sent the whole cup to the White House.

So I only met al-Qosi. Now I have met a number of former prisoners after [their release]— British and Sudanese.

PW: Did the meetings have an effect on you?

TP: Actually, it didn't have any real effect on my thinking. It only confirmed the conclusion I had already come to, that here's why they fight. Our client was a very calm person, low-key person. This was his personality, this wasn't just putting on an act. He had gone to Afghanistan in the late 1980s from Sudan, and volunteered, maybe having been encouraged by CIA propaganda to go fight the Russians. He came late in the war, so he might have done a little fighting late in the war, and that war ended, but the group he joined up with happened to be

bin Laden's, because that was one of the groups fighting and organizing people. So he went to continue fighting the Russians in Chechnya, but he got there just at the time when a cease fire was going down. So he didn't do much fighting there. He probably was never involved with much fighting. Then he went to Sudan, when bin Laden went there. He became more of a gofer for bin Laden and did some menial jobs trading produce from bin Laden's farm, which he wasn't very good at.

PW: Bin Laden had a farm in Sudan?

TP: Yes, he invested quite heavily in Sudan for a while. But the US put pressure on the Sudanese government to kick him out, so then he went back to Afghanistan. Our client al-Qosi followed him to Afghanistan. There he was basically a driver and a logistics guy, picking people up and bringing them there. He definitely agreed with al Qaeda's goal of fighting the west, for the reasons al Qaeda said. We were being monitored, so I didn't get into real specifics. So I couldn't quote you.

On Israel, I did casually say or carefully say something about Israel, and—yeah, that's an issue. But I knew that because the other client had created a propaganda video or a documentary of why we fight.

PW: The coffee cup one?

TP: Yeah. In 1998 or 99. The video is called *The State of the Umma*, the Umma being the Islamic people. It's their version of our World War II propaganda movie, *Why We Fight*. And they list the reasons. The three reasons in 1998 or 1999 were: The US troops staying in Saudi Arabia. It's not just they're on supposed holy ground, rather it's why they're there, they're propping up a Saudi regime that is plundering the state's coffers.

The second reason they cited, I think in this order, I believe was the sanctions on Iraq which led to the deaths of indisputably 500,000 children, which Madeleine Albright said was worth it, and they obviously disagreed. She was asked about it on 60 Minutes, and I think Lesley Stahl said, "Well we hear there's been 500,000 children that died as a result of sanctions, Madame Secretary." "Well, we felt it was worth it." She later said it's not what I meant. But that's what went out, as her response.

And the third reason was the Israeli military occupation of Palestine. And those were the three reasons listed in 1998 or 1999. That's what they were operating under when they planned 9/11. 9/11 was not intended to bring the United States down, but it was a classic guerrilla technique: how do you bring the enemy into your territory. Bin Laden had concluded, "Why are we going to fight the Saudis when the Saudis are the tool of the Americans? Get the real enemy." And none of

this is to defend anything bin Laden did. But he attacked a building, the Pentagon, that was a legal military target. And the World Trade Center, you could make an argument that it was too, because it was crammed with national security offices. There were a lot of federal government offices in there.

They wanted to draw the United States into their battle space, so they would have a better advantage in fighting us. But the purpose in targeting the United States was because it was the United States pulling all the strings in the Middle East. Including with Israel. Because we're a Joint Military Command with Israel, you could say, today. Then with Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. You can tell me if you disagree. But when you look at the ammo carriers— when Israel runs out of ammo in an assault on Gaza, we're the logistics train, bringing up and resupplying them. Just like my unit in Saudi Arabia was the logistics train for the troops, we're doing the same for the Israeli Defense Forces when they launch a war.

PW: So would you say you became politicized?

TP: My politics today are non-ideological, if you can call it that. As far as ideologies, I can disagree with everybody. Libertarians may be right against the wars, but they advocate economic policies that allow the Sheldon Adelsons to get ever richer, so that they can push for a war. So, functionally, they're supporting war. Uri Avnery captured the Republicans perfectly. When Netanyahu spoke to Congress, he said it reminded him of a German Reichstag session, and half the Democrats are as bad. So there is at least a remnant of Democrats who aren't fascists.

So I don't consider myself ideological. But a pragmatist. Certainly with ethics—we don't go out and kill people at random. But also arguing, "This is against our national interest; what we're doing in the Middle East is not advancing our national interest."

PW: Where is Israel in your thinking?

TP: I think it's right up there with everything I'm criticizing about the United States. Again, militarily, we're functionally a joint military command. We know all about the PNAC [Project for a New American Century] thing. And before that it was Oded Yinon, writing in 1982, advising the Israeli government to fragment the Middle East. He was an Israeli foreign service officer saying, "Rather than dealing with these other Arab states and being in a state of war, what we should do is fragment them, break them into pieces." And later when Netanyahu was prime minister, in 1996, Richard Perle came along making that same recommendation [in the report, *A Clean Break*].

PW: A lot of people make a lot of recommendations. Is that the active thread in their thinking?

TP: Yes. I'm acquainted with Ilan Pappé and 1948 now. So I know much of that was being done well before today. And whatever opinions are of 1948, and criticisms—myself I'm a bit of a pragmatist, ok, so, Israel is in existence, and life and history is filled with injustices, like the Native Americans. You can't undo all that. So as a pragmatist, Israel has got those borders. Even though in 1948 it went beyond those borders. They got those '67 borders [from the 1949 armistice], and so, to reconcile and bring some peace— you're not going to undo '48, but we got to not allow them to continue that conquest that's taking place. I mean, if the United States was continuing to wage war against the indigenous people, say, or Mexico or South America, continuing the war against the indigenous people, I'd say, "OK whatever happened 150 years ago, there's got to be a statute of limitations here, it's got to be fixed, we can't continue it." That's the crime going on today; we can't allow an ongoing crime to continue.

So reading all this, and seeing the part where the expansion is continuing. And Ben Zion Netanyahu [Benjamin Netanyahu's father] said, "Wipe out the Arabs, get rid of them; and my son agrees with me!" Though he's more cautious about what he says. I can give you the exact quote.

PW: How influential has that thinking been in the U.S.?

TP: Well I think before 9/11 it had obviously been influential with the neoconservatives. Which I had left. But I was still leaning toward the conservative side of things, in large part because of Bill Clinton and Hillary and their wars on Kosovo. That's what resonated with Buchanan's criticism. Because no one on the left was talking about this. So that by default put me on the right, as an anti-Interventionist.

And you got the Christian Zionists. So it was always there. But with 9/11 it expanded exponentially. When 9/11 happened it created a readymade audience for the neocons to say we got to do what Israel does. Karen Kwiatkowski worked in the Pentagon at the time, and she said the IDF officers had regular access. They didn't even have to go through, like I did, with a pass, to get through.

So right away we turn to the IDF. But what the IDF knows is not counter terrorism, in the sense of a democracy defending itself against outside assault— what the IDF knows is how to exercise a military occupation, in the most repressive manner.

And the law of war allows a belligerent nation when they're occupying a nation to protect itself from what the law calls hostile acts. But there's a danger,

when you adopt this idea of martial law and military occupation, you're bringing in totalitarian law. The law of war is fundamentally totalitarian law. Because it allows you to protect yourself as the belligerent against any possible threat. So in the case of Israel, a kid writes a graffiti on a wall in the occupation, that can be deemed a hostile act, and they are put in military detention.

PW: Do you remember a case like that?

TP: Yes, I remember reading about such a case. So a hostile act, here's where it raises questions about our drone targeting. We deemed everybody in Iraq who opposed us to be a terrorist, even though they were a legitimate resistance force under the principle we established in France and elsewhere, in World War II. But we're deeming them to be terrorists. And are we doing the same with people who we're targeting with drones?

And maybe someone who is a journalist— and there have been a lot of journalists killed by the United States— are we deeming them to be undertaking a hostile act just because of opinions that they're expressing? I suspect we are.

I was at a Code Pink event on drone warfare, and they had a guest there speaking about a relative who'd been killed. He was a youth, 16 or 17, and he went to an anti-drone war event. A Pakistani politician held a large event in one of the larger cities against drone warfare, and this kid had gone to it, and on his way back he was killed by a drone. Again, when you look at the way the war of law has been interpreted under martial law, the customary way we think of a hostile act is someone carrying an AK-47, but just as I was in psyops—propaganda is deemed to be a hostile act, and propaganda is loosely interpreted. So in a strict military mind, in that tunnel vision mind, if you're weakening our will, like they described in *On Strategy*, then you're aiding the enemy. Therefore you are the enemy.

That's what the generals were arguing in Vietnam. These antiwar protesters are weakening our will, therefore they're aiding the enemy, therefore they should be treated like the enemy and put in military detention. If you can put somebody in military detention, then you can kill them as well. Because it's the same principle. In one of the early military commission cases, they had put this US citizen [Yaser Esam] Hamdi in military detention. It was bought up on habeas corpus appeal, and the Supreme Court justices said, I think it was Sandra Day O'Connor who wrote the Opinion, in warfare you can kill your enemies, so of course you can put your enemies in military detention. And the reverse is true. If you can put somebody in detention, you can also kill them, because they're the enemy.

I've talked to the group that monitors drone warfare in London. And I have asked, how many journalists have been killed. They said 9 or 10 at least. Again putting things together, I don't think it's wildly speculative to say, we have targeted people who are most outspoken against military policy either as journalists or activists in the Islamic world, under the principle that they're committing hostile acts against us. Which may just be what they're saying.

And al-Awlaki the same way. He's accused of being a propagandist. But when they've been challenged they say, "He was actually an operational leader." That conjures up the vision that he's planning military acts. But you could say as well [that] I, as a psyops NCO, was an operational leader too. In my case I was a member of the military. But what they're saying is, "If you're engaged in propaganda, you're engaged in war. Therefore you're a lawful target. You're taking direct part in hostilities." And that's what gets to a lot of civilians, that we don't bother even to defend what we did. We say they have an operational role in the war, when they might just be expressing dissenting thoughts.

PW: What do you mean, we haven't defended?

TP: Other than Awlaki, we haven't bothered really. When we kill a group of people and they're civilians, they're collateral damage. We've never gone into specifics of this, because no one has even challenged us who has any voice. When you kill this journalist, they keep track of it, in London. But they don't have a voice that anyone listens to beyond their narrow circle. But, like I say, they told me that at least 9 or 10 journalists have been killed.

PW: Dissenting voices, where are they in the culture?

TP: They're virtually nonexistent in my opinion. Which is a danger. We've evolved into this fully militaristic society. You have writers like Phil Giraldi, Ray McGovern, Glenn Greenwald, and websites like Consortiumnews, Antiwar.com, the Intercept, Alternet, and Mondoweiss.net opposing militarism. How many others are there? Very few. We've just been overwhelmed. The Democrats court Petraeus and Petraeus endorses Clinton, and Republicans court General Flynn who collaborates with neocon Michael Ledeen. The mainstream has been fairly unified. Trump is a bit of an outlier. But like I told a lawyer friend who wanted to start a superPAC against Trump, I'm against Trump, but I'm also against the entire Republican party, and I'm not sure that they're not worse. Trump you can at least recognize as a fascist. It's the ones who we don't understand how their policies are fascist that are the real danger. Ted Cruz and Rubio and what's his name Bush, all these guys wanted to continue the George W. Bush policies.

And Hillary Clinton, going back to the first Clinton administration, people said

then, she and Madeleine Albright were the hawks in that administration. And she's changed nothing.

PW: Are you worried about the lack of voices questioning these policies?

TP: Absolutely. I've mentioned the case of Ernest Fraenkel. Ernst Fraenkel was describing the situation in 1939 that at least is in formation here. Section 1021 [of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2012] gives the prerogative to the government. What it says is that a military officer could go and arrest someone should the commander deem that person to be a terrorist threat or a terrorist. That's exactly what the Gestapo used to do with an internal enemy. That's what 1021 provides a legal basis for.

I've argued about this with a lawyer I have a lot of respect for. I say, "This applies to US citizens." He said, "It doesn't apply to US citizens." But the other section explicitly refers to foreigners. There's sections 1021 and 1022, and 1022 applies to foreign terrorists. Within that section, it says it only applies to foreign people. But 1021 doesn't say anything about foreign or domestic. Just by a standard statutory interpretation, I would argue that 1022 explicitly excludes U.S. citizens. Which it doesn't have to do. While 1021 doesn't exclude US citizens.

PW: Has it ever been applied?

TP: What I argue is the correct legal interpretation has been applied, in the Hedges v. Obama lawsuit. That's why I keep going back to it. In Hedges v Obama, Chris Hedges and a couple of other activists brought a case against the government for injunctive relief. They said, "We don't know what we can do anymore, we don't know who we can talk to, we don't know what we can say." The district court granted the injunctive relief of 1021 and the second circuit court of appeals issued a stay, and the DoJ went in and said, "Yeah, we're at war, the president is commander in chief, and furthermore, you have the Congress--and when the Congress and the president are in agreement, the president's powers are at its apex. 1021 was passed by Congress, so therefore the presidential powers are at the apex. "

So if they deem someone to be a terrorist or a terrorist threat, they could be put in military detention. That doesn't exclude someone for something they write. The government made the argument, it doesn't exclude just expressive activities. It can include expressive activities. It gets back to the kid writing graffiti on the wall. That's a hostile act if the military leader deems it to be so. So in Hedges v Obama, the DoJ made that argument that expressive activities could be included and could be considered a hostile act, meriting military detention. But the case was dismissed because Hedges and others didn't

have standing because their expressive activities had never been affected. Which is how these cases are always dismissed.

So in other words, we have this Government on record saying, "We're not ruling out any powers."

PW: In my complacency as a journalist who's a dissenter leading a happy life, I say, Todd you have a dark view of world. There's a difference between prosecution and marginalization. We're not being heard, but we're not being thrown in jails.

TP: Well, number one I say *Hedges v. Obama* vindicates my concern. What the DoJ said to the court vindicates my concern. Number two, I'm not saying this is imminent. Posner and Vermeule wrote a book, they're the two who say we have to go back and study Carl Schmitt. Prominent law professors, one at Chicago, one at Harvard, they say, go back and study the work of Nazi Carl Schmitt. In *The Executive Unbound*, three years ago they wrote, "there's always a political factor."

So yes, the president has all these unlimited powers and the Congress has no constraints on them, but they say, "Don't worry, there are political factors that will inhibit the president." So what they're saying in essence is, "So *Hedges*, yeah the government says they can throw you in military detention, but don't worry. They won't do it." But in the right situation, as these generals said in Vietnam, if it means a military setback or defeat, yes, we've got to resort to these measures. So right now we're fighting a nondescript enemy, whether it's ISIS or al Qaeda, but now we're ramping up against Russia...

Yes, at the present day, as of right now, I agree, I think it would be unlikely. But one factor always to be considered in warfare, is the legitimacy of your cause, who you're defending. That's what you're fighting over in a guerrilla war. So you always want to maintain the utmost legitimacy. [...] We profess to be a democracy, so we profess to protect civil rights. We don't want to squander that legitimacy if we can help it.

**Philip Weiss is the founder and co-editor of [Mondoweiss.net](http://Mondoweiss.net), where this interview [originally appeared](#).**

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## US Media Ignores CIA Cover-up on Torture

A group of U.S. intelligence veterans chastises the mainstream U.S. media for virtually ignoring a British newspaper's account of the gripping inside story on

how the CIA tried to block the U.S. Senate's torture investigation.

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Vice Chairman, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence

**FROM:** Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity

**SUBJECT:** U.S. Media Mum On How Your Committee Faced Down Both CIA and Obama

We write to thank you for your unwavering support for your extraordinarily courageous and tenacious staff in (1) investigating CIA torture under the Bush/Cheney administration and (2) resisting CIA/White House attempts under the Obama administration to cover up heinous torture crimes like waterboarding.

We confess to having been shocked at the torture detailed in the version of the executive summary your Committee released on December 9, 2014. We found ourselves wondering what additional behavior could have been deemed so repugnant that the White House and CIA insisted it be redacted; and if the entire 6,700-page investigation – with whatever redaction might be truly necessary – would ever see the light of day. We think you could take steps now to make it less likely that the full report be deep-sixed, and we will make some suggestions below toward that end.

With well over 400 years of intelligence experience under our collective belt, we wondered how you managed to get the investigation finished and the executive summary up and out (though redacted). We now know the backstory – thanks to the unstinting courage of the committee's principal investigator Daniel Jones, who has been interviewed by Spencer Ackerman, an investigative reporter for The (UK) Guardian newspaper. The titanic struggle depicted by Ackerman reads like a crime novel; sadly, the four-part series is nonfiction:

I. "Senate investigator breaks silence about CIA's 'failed coverup' of torture report"

II. "Inside the fight to reveal the CIA's torture secrets"

III. " 'A constitutional crisis': the CIA turns on the Senate"

IV. "No looking back: the CIA torture report's aftermath"

Ackerman's reporting on Jones's tenacity in facing down the gorilla CIA makes abundantly clear how richly deserved was the encomium you gave Jones when he left the committee staff in December 2015.

You noted, "Without his indefatigable work on the Intelligence Committee staff,

the Senate report on the CIA's Detention and Interrogation Program would not have been completed, nor would its 525-page executive summary have been released to the public."

It seems equal praise might well be due to any Snowden-like patriot/whistleblower who "inadvertently" included the "Panetta Review" in the reams of material given your committee by the CIA.

Remarkably, a full week after *The Guardian* carried Ackerman's revelations, none has been picked up by U.S. "mainstream" newspapers. Not the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post* – not even *The Hill*.

(As for alternative media, Charles P. Pierce's timely piece for *Esquire* whetted his readers' appetite for the gripping detail of the *Guardian* series, explaining that it would be "unfair both to Ackerman's diligence and Jones's courage" to try to summarize even just the first installment. "Read the whole damn thing," Pierce advises.)

And so, the culprits who should be hanging their heads in shame are out and about, with some still collecting book royalties and some blithely working for this or that candidate for president. As if nothing happened. Sadly, given the soporific state of our mainstream media – particularly on sensitive issues like these – their silence is nothing new, although it does seem to have gotten even worse in recent years.

The late William Colby, CIA director from 1973 to 1976, has been quoted as saying: "The CIA owns everyone of any significance in the major media." Whether or not Colby was quoted correctly, the experience of the past several decades suggests it is largely true. Better sourced is a quote from William Casey, CIA director from 1981 to 1987: "We'll know our disinformation program is complete when everything the American public believes is false."

In these circumstances, we know from sad experience that there is no way any of us can get on any of the Sunday talk shows, for example – despite our enviable record for getting it right. Nor does it seem likely that any of the "mainstream" media will invite you to discuss the highly instructive revelations in *The Guardian*. We respectfully suggest that you take the initiative to obtain media exposure for this very important story.

One additional request: As you and your investigators know better than anyone, it is essential to safeguard the integrity not only of the unredacted executive summary but also of the entire 6,700-page committee report on the CIA's Detention and Interrogation Program.

And, again, you are aware that as soon as Sen. Richard Burr, R-North Carolina,

took the gavel from you, he took steps seemingly aimed at ensuring that the full report never sees the light of day. Could you ask him why, as soon as he became chair, he asked the executive branch to transfer their copies to the Senate Intelligence Committee?

Many interpreted that as an ill-disguised attempt to thwart holding accountable those responsible for the abuses. Moreover, if the report cannot be reviewed by those who might be asked to participate in activities like torture in the future, how is it even possible for anyone to learn from the prior unfortunate experience?

The public is entitled to the entire story about the CIA torture program and its lies to Congress, the White House, and to us. Any attempt to bury the fullest investigation of the torture program – an investigation that provides an example of Congressional oversight at its best – would undermine the democratic accountability that is supposed to be provided by the separation of powers.

Furthermore, as you were quoted in the Guardian series, the agency searches “may have undermined the constitutional framework essential to effective congressional oversight of intelligence activities or any other government function . . . .”

Senator Jay Rockefeller, D-West Virginia, was exactly on point: “You either have oversight and separation of powers with the checks and balances that come with that, or you don’t. It’s amazing that, once again, no one at the CIA was held accountable.” Consequently, the issue now is not only the cover-up of torture by the CIA but – at least equally important – the “unbridled agency that spied on Americans (including Senate Intelligence Committee staffers) as eagerly as they spied on foreign adversaries,” as the Guardian described it in referring to the Church Committee investigation in the 1970s.

Does American democracy deserve any less than an intense investigation of the CIA’s obstruction of the democratic process in the 2000s?

*The Guardian* revelations make it still more difficult for the kind of excuses made by those who can hardly pretend to be disinterested observers – former CIA directors George Tenet, Porter Goss, Michael Hayden, for example – who wrote *Rebuttal: The CIA Responds to the Senate Intelligence Committee’s Study of Its Detention and Interrogation Program*, published on September 9, 2015. We published our own [\(VIPS\) critique of “Rebuttal”](#) five days later. And before the final vote on John Brennan’s nomination to become CIA director, [we tried to warn you](#) not to trust him.

We believe you will agree that more needs to be done to replant the moral

moorings of honesty that must anchor the intelligence profession to which we have given so many years. And we think that one step in that direction would be for you to seize this new opportunity to give prominence to the edifying story of how your committee and its staffers stepped up so effectively to their responsibilities in investigating and exposing the very sad and delicate chapter of CIA torture.

The play-by-play provided by the *Guardian* series, with its appropriate focus on the top investigator Daniel Jones, has created an opportunity we hope will not be squandered; a chance to tell a truly uplifting story sure to encourage others to behave in similarly exemplary manner.

*For the Steering Group, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS)*

Jean Maria Arrigo, PhD, member of 2005 American Psychological Association task force evaluating the role of psychologists in U.S. intelligence and military interrogations of detainees (associate VIPS)

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Kirk Wiebe, former Senior Analyst, SIGINT Automation Research Center, NSA

Lawrence Wilkerson, Colonel (USA, ret.), Distinguished Visiting Professor, College of William and Mary (associate VIPS)

Valerie Plame Wilson, former CIA Operations Officer

Ann Wright, Col., US Army (ret.); Foreign Service Officer (resigned)

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## Unseemly Competition for Israel's Blessing

President Obama's record \$38 billion in U.S. military aid to Israel shows neither U.S. major party wants to be "out-Israelied." The Trump campaign endorses an Israeli claim that Palestinians want to ethnically cleanse Jews, ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

The Republican Party and Republican candidates have been moving over the past few years ever more fully into the embrace of Israel's right-wing government, even more than American politicians in general do. This trend has been apparent notwithstanding the traditional preference of AIPAC, the core of the Israel lobby, to keep its support bipartisan so that its influence on U.S. policy will not be largely dependent on the success of only one U.S. party.

The de facto alliance between the Israeli government of Benjamin Netanyahu and the 2012 presidential campaign of Mitt Romney can be considered a part of this trend. A more obvious part was the spectacle last year of Congressional

Republicans inviting the head of a foreign government – i.e., Netanyahu – to denounce from the podium of the House chamber a major U.S. foreign policy initiative.

For this year's campaign, the Republican Party platform surrenders all traces of independent thought on issues involving Israel and defers completely to the preferences and themes of Netanyahu's government. The platform makes no mention whatever of Palestinians, of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or of a two-state solution or any other resolution of that conflict.

It explicitly denies that there is any such thing as an Israeli occupation. It calls for outlawing any boycotts or other peaceful measures directed against Israeli policies in Israeli-controlled territories. It speaks of "no daylight between America and Israel." This section of the platform would read no differently if it had come straight out of a printer in Netanyahu's office.

Republican canvassers for Donald Trump are showing in another way their attitude toward the occupation by opening offices in settlements in the occupied West Bank to seek votes from U.S. citizens who live there. Those running the operation say their funds are raised locally but they coordinate daily with the Trump campaign. Their operation is based in what, according not only to long-established U.S. policy under multiple administrations but also the position of the international community generally, is an illegal Israeli presence.

### **Endorsing Netanyahu's Video**

Now the Trump campaign has endorsed a video from Netanyahu asserting that Palestinian leaders call for "ethnic cleansing" of Jews from any future Palestinian state. Such an endorsement is especially significant because the assertion in the video is an especially inapt portrayal of relevant issues.

Any objective and fair-minded observer would conclude, as a matter of accuracy and of propriety, that the video should be roundly criticized. That is what the Obama administration – even though it has no reason to be picking new fights with Netanyahu's government – has done.

A State Department spokesperson stated, "We obviously strongly disagree with the characterization that those who oppose settlement activity or view it as an obstacle to peace are somehow calling for ethnic cleansing of Jews from the West Bank. We believe that using that type of terminology is inappropriate and unhelpful."

Netanyahu's statement in the video that "the Palestinian leadership actually demands a Palestinian state with one precondition: no Jews" is false. The Palestinian leadership has clearly and explicitly stated that Jews and members

of any other religious or ethnic groups would be welcome to reside in, and accept citizenship of, a Palestinian state. What the Palestinians have rejected is continuation of Israeli citizens in Israeli settlements as a kind of extra-territorial Israeli presence within a Palestinian state.

Netanyahu appears to have based his assertion on a comment in 2013 by Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas that “in a final resolution, we would not see the presence of a single Israeli – civilian or soldier – on our lands.” Netanyahu’s substitution of “Jew” for “Israeli” in his incorrect assertion is the same technique he uses more broadly to wrap everything his government does in the cloak of world Jewry. It is the same false equivalence that underlies the habitual pinning by some of Netanyahu’s defenders of the label anti-Semitism on any and all criticism of his government’s policies.

### **A Painful History**

The whole matter of minorities in states with a Jewish or Arab majority has a relevant and painful history. A continuing characteristic of that history has been one of Arabs having control of less land than the relative sizes of the populations would suggest.

In the United Nations partition plan that in 1947 laid out boundaries for new Jewish and Arab states in what had been the British mandate of Palestine, the Jewish state was allocated 56 percent of the land even though Jews constituted only 33 percent of the population. As a result, while the projected Arab-run state would have had only a tiny (one percent) Jewish minority, the projected Jewish-run state would have had a population that was 45 percent Arab.

What many Arabs considered the injustice of such a division of land underlay the rejection of the U.N. plan by Arab governments and leaders. In the ensuing war of 1948-1949, the Arabs’ military failure left them with only about 22 percent of Palestine. And then Israel’s military conquests in 1967 gave it control of the whole thing.

It is hardly surprising that today, as Palestinians think about a future Palestinian state that would be only a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of what they consider to have once been theirs, they reject even more inroads, in the form of permanent Israeli settlements, on whatever fraction they would be left with.

The international community has seen things the same way. Every peace plan over the last couple of decades has included the concept that, wherever final boundaries might be drawn, withdrawal of some Israeli settlements would be necessary, partly to make possible the economic viability of a Palestinian

state.

## Reality Turned Upside-Down

As Matt Duss observes, if the “ethnic cleansing” accusation were to be applied to Palestinian leaders, it also would have to be applied to other international figures who have worked on the problem, including at least the last three U.S. presidents.

In his video, Netanyahu highlights the fact that Israel has a 20 percent Arab population and that this shows Israel’s “diversity” and “openness.” He tries to pair this observation with the issue of Israeli settlements in the occupied territories. The Israeli Arabs are not an obstacle to peace, he says, so why should the settlements be considered illegitimate and an obstacle to peace? Of course, there is really no comparison at all between colonization of conquered territory by the conqueror against the will of – and to the detriment of – the existing inhabitants, and the residence of Arabs within Israel because they and their ancestors had been living there all along.

But another observation to make about Netanyahu’s rhetoric on this subject is how much it contrasts with his insistence at other times that the Palestinians explicitly recognize Israel as a “Jewish state.” This precondition has been one of the current impediments to getting any productive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations under way.

Palestinian leaders reject that demand not only because it might prejudice resolution of the so-called right of return issue but also because they would be formally endorsing the second-class citizenship of their Arab brethren within Israel. Consistency evidently is not Netanyahu’s objective; indefinitely putting off any peaceful settlement of the conflict, while finding ways to blame Palestinians for the impasse, is.

A major backdrop to the charge about ethnic cleansing, one that liberal voices in Israel have noted, is the forcible replacement of one population with another that actually has occurred in Palestine. The biggest instance was when some 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were forced from their homes during the 1948 war in what Arabs call the Nakba or catastrophe. That is a major reason why that 20 percent Arab population that Netanyahu used as a rhetorical prop in his video is not any larger than it is. Currently Netanyahu’s government conducts a more gradual form of forcible replacement of one population with another through, on one hand, continued expansion of Israeli settlements and, on the other hand, the confiscation of land, demolition of homes, erection of economic impediments, lethal force, and other measures that squeeze life out of the Palestinian community in the West Bank. Use of the term *ethnic cleansing* may be appropriate,

but not because of anything that Palestinians are doing or have the ability or opportunity to do.

The Trump campaign's reaction to all of this, as voiced by Trump's adviser on U.S.-Israeli relations, is that Netanyahu "makes exactly the right point" and that the Obama administration "should be ashamed of their misguided reaction" to Netanyahu's video.

Evidently the strategy – notwithstanding Trump briefly making the lobby nervous earlier this year by saying he would be "neutral" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – is an especially uncompromising version of the usual American political strategy of making sure one is not out-Israeled by one's opponent. And it is not as if Hillary Clinton has given any indication that she will mount a challenge on these issues from the other direction.

**Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of Why America Misunderstands the World. (This article first appeared as a blog post at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)**

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## Russian Hardliners Gain from US Putin-Bashing

The harsh U.S. rhetoric denouncing Russian President Putin is having the adverse effect in Russia of strengthening hard-line "populists" in upcoming elections who think Putin's ruling party is too soft on the U.S., reports Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Last week, Hillary Clinton told reporters on her campaign plane that the Russians are trying to disrupt the U.S. elections to discredit the process and sow discord among Americans. This goes one step further than her previous charges of Russian influence thought the "Kremlin's candidate," Donald Trump, or still earlier, the claim that the Democratic National Committee's server had been hacked by intelligence services reporting to Vladimir Putin. Of course, all these charges were made without proof.

Meanwhile, in the Russian Federation, where folks are facing their own national elections on Sept. 18, a kind of mirror-image denunciation of foreign (meaning American) interference in their domestic politics is also heard from many in the

Russian Establishment.

In the past week, the widely respected Levada Center, best known for its public opinion polls, found itself accused by federal authorities of being a “foreign agent” due to revenues it earns from multinational companies for whom it does marketing studies. Its director said that if the label sticks, the Center may be forced to close its doors.

Also, this past week, the International Republican Institute (IRI), a “non-governmental organization” chaired by Sen. McCain and with an operation in Moscow, was declared a threat to Russian national security and ordered to halt its activities in Russia. (Most of IRI’s money comes from the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. State Department and the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, whose president has called for Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ouster.)

But the way the elections in both the U.S. and Russia are taking shape has considerably more in common than these complaints of outside interference. I see a much bigger common factor in the growing, possibly decisive role of populism in both Russia and the U.S. this year.

In the United States, the rise of populism and its possible victory at the polls in November over the opposition of the political establishment of the Democratic and Republican parties have been obvious from the start and throughout the progression of the candidacy of Donald Trump.

In a recent full-page analytical article headlined, “The Trump Phenomenon,” the *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, one of Russia’s most serious and well-written daily newspapers, identifies economics as the driving force behind the populist wave that Trump is riding. Specifically, he made himself a voice of the millions of working-class Americans who have suffered over the last 30 years from the deindustrialization and outsourcing which have been part and parcel of the globalization that successive U.S. administrations from the two mainstream parties have actively promoted through “free trade” deals.

Meanwhile, the foreign policy component of Trump’s agenda gives voice to the views of the majority of Americans who consistently over the past 30 years have said they want their country to stop being the world’s policeman and to pursue more peaceful policies by acting in consensus as an equal partner with the world’s other major powers.

This resistance to the Establishment’s insistence on U.S. global dominance has been a constant feature of Pew polls, including one last spring that found nearly six in ten Americans (or 57 percent) feeling that the U.S. should deal

with its problems and other countries should deal with their own. Only 37 percent thought the U.S. should help other countries deal with their problems.

But this attitude has been dismissed by the foreign policy establishment as revealing nothing more than public ignorance of the world's dangers and complexities, a preoccupation with consumerism, and an unwillingness to accept hardships for the common security by exercising global leadership.

Consequently, one can summarize and conclude that Donald Trump's planned foreign policy has deep populist roots. His proposals to find dialogue with Russia on common security interests are neither a sign of his being "Putin's candidate" or of arbitrarily and capriciously adopting a position solely to run against what the Establishment is saying for the sake of drawing attention to himself.

### **Hard-line Russian 'Populism'**

By contrast, the curious and important thing to note about Russian populism is that it is driven far less by economics, although the Russian citizenry is hurting badly from the third year of recession that came out of the fall in energy prices and Western sanctions over Crimea and Ukraine.

The driving factor of Russian populism is instead national pride over the reunification with Crimea and the country's resistance to U.S. and European punishment. This populism is expressed through belt-tightening, import substitutions and other measures.

Russians have traditionally been a complaining people but my own reading of the popular mood not so much from media as from talking to ordinary people – and especially to ordinary people over the fence and in the grocery store of the hamlet where I have a summer home, 80 kilometers south of St. Petersburg – is that they are getting by and making the best of it without fuss.

Populism has merged with patriotism, as shown by the massively successful May 9 celebrations of Russia's World War II victory which channeled a wellspring of emotion into the Immortal Regiment marches in cities and towns across the country. This patriotic pride explains the 82 percent approval rating that Vladimir Putin currently enjoys.

Translated into electoral politics, the patriotic sense of mind means that Russian populism will likely bring a turn to the right at the voting booths this Sunday. Although the governing party United Russia advertises itself as "the party of the President [Putin]," it also is the party of Dmitry Medvedev, who is its chairman. As prime minister, Medvedev is still seen as a liberal who promotes free-market economics rather than state-guided reindustrialization. He is seen as soft on the U.S. and soft on Europe.

In other words, the street says the governing party, United Russia, will not retain its majority of seats in the Duma and its showing may dip as low as 30 percent of the vote, a reaction not to Putin but to the party's perceived lack of toughness against the West. The consequence would likely be a coalition cabinet, bringing in ministers from the runners-up. And who might those runners-up be?

In the U.S. media, there is the very mistaken view that Russia has no opposition parties. That view is predominantly only because the U.S. State Department and Official Washington's specialist institutes and think tanks disdain any politicians and movements in Russia that are not on the U.S. payroll. Unless you are Yabloko or Parnas, you are not an opposition party, so our experts tell us.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I am persuaded that the position of being the second largest party in the Duma will be hotly contested between the Communists, who throughout the 1990s actually were the country's majority party, and the Liberal Democratic (LDPR) party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, which was the first non-Communist party founded back in what was still Soviet Russia.

On questions of economic policy, those two parties stand at opposite poles. But on the question of foreign policy, they are both more royalist than the king. Judging by the level of paid outdoor advertising on highways around the metropolises of St. Petersburg and Moscow, I would put my money on an LDPR high turnout and vote on Sept. 18.

In what little exposure U.S. media has given Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in the past, Western readers might assume that is just a buffoon who has served the Kremlin's interests by drawing nationalists away from the Communists and so reducing its threat. But my reading of Zhirinovskiy, including from seeing and sparring with him up close, is that his buffoonery has been calculated as has Donald Trump's.

Playing the clown and wearing the outlandish bright red sports jacket on TV spared Zhirinovskiy from being taken too seriously by the Establishment even as he delivered below the belt punches against the powers-that-be.

### **A Challenge to Putin's Party**

In a feature television program celebrating his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday in July, Zhirinovskiy made it clear that in his 27 years in parliament he has seen it all, understands very well how the Kremlin has maintained power by one dirty trick after another. In particular, he explained to the Pervy Kanal presenter and journalist Vladimir Soloviev how the single-mandate scheme which is being used in 2016 to complement the party list system of electing Duma deputies gives an unfair advantage to United Russia.

The scheme, which was taken from practices in some West European democracies, has been popularized as a means of bringing into parliament at least some deputies who are well known and dedicated to the district that elects them. But since United Russia has more candidates with more experience in power across the country, it can profit best from this scheme.

In LDPR's full-page advertisement-campaign manifesto in *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, Zhirinovskiy and his associates denounce another feature of this year's national elections: the appearance on the ballot of a half-dozen ersatz parties, parties that long ago combined forces and disappeared as separate entities. Zhirinovskiy is calling them "subsidiaries" of United Russia, launched solely for the purpose of sopping up protest votes that otherwise might go to Duma parties like his own.

It is to be expected that there will be no vote-rigging or other illegal abuses in Sunday's national elections such as set off the dramatic protests during the last Duma elections in December 2011. The tricks that Zhirinovskiy is denouncing are legal even if they are unethical. They are no different from what goes on in mature democracies like the U.S. (gerrymandering and giving built-in advantages to the two major political parties, for example) for the purpose of "managed democracy," which is by no means a made-in-Russia concept.

The astute critique of the Russian elites in power which Zhirinovskiy puts forth underlines the justified fear of United Russia that it will lose control of parliament. Meanwhile, Zhirinovskiy has changed his wardrobe to a classy business suit and changed his demeanor to almost calm, measured speech as I saw a few days ago when we both took part in the Pervy Kanal's leading political talk show, "Sunday Evening with Vladimir Soloviev."

This was my second chance to observe him up close in the past four months and the difference was palpable. You could sense that he feels power within reach and is hoping for a ministerial portfolio in the new post-election government.

A good showing for Zhirinovskiy's party on Sept. 18 and demotion to minority party for United Russia may well mean the renunciation of any lingering hopes of getting along with or being buddies with the U.S. It could result in new, harder-line marching orders for Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, who has been the principal negotiator with the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

On Sunday, before the show, I had a five minute tete-a-tete with TV host Vladimir Soloviev about Trump. Given Soloviev's position as the darling of Russian state television, the man who gets to do the big interviews with Vladimir Putin, I think it is safe to say that Soloviev represents a significant part of the Kremlin establishment. And he does *not* want to see Trump elected.

This runs directly counter to everything the American neocons, the Democratic standard bearer and the mainstream U.S. media are saying about the Putin-Trump “relationship.” But it is perfectly logical. Soloviev sees Trump as volatile and unpredictable. In this resistance to a potentially unpredictable Trump, we see characteristic Russian trust in the virtues of stability. Better the devil you know...etc.

But there is also something else going on. Soloviev, like a large swath of Russians both in and out of power, enjoys seeing the U.S. as a malicious enemy. In a direct mirror image of the U.S. budget process, having such an enemy is good for those seeking resources for the Russian armed forces and their military-industrial complex.

The bottom line is that the rise of populists in Russia may bring in more hard-liners on foreign policy just when – if Trump were to prevail – the rise of populists in the United States may bring in doves.

**Gilbert Doctorow is the European Coordinator of The American Committee for East West Accord Ltd. His most recent book *Does Russia Have a Future?* was published in August 2015.**

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## Getting Fooled on Iraq, Libya, Now Russia

**Exclusive:** After the British report exposing falsehoods to justify invading Iraq in 2003, a new U.K. inquiry found similar misconduct in the 2011 attack on Libya, but no lessons are learned for the West’s new propaganda about Russia, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A British parliamentary inquiry into the Libyan fiasco has reported what should have been apparent from the start in 2011 – and was to some of us – that the West’s military intervention to “protect” civilians in Benghazi was a cover for what became another disastrous “regime change” operation.

The report from the U.K.’s Foreign Affairs Committee confirms that the U.S. and other Western governments exaggerated the human rights threat posed by Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and then quickly morphed the “humanitarian” mission into a military invasion that overthrew and killed Gaddafi, leaving behind political and social chaos.

The report's significance is that it shows how little was learned from the Iraq War fiasco in which George W. Bush's administration hyped and falsified intelligence to justify invading Iraq and killing its leader, Saddam Hussein. In both cases, U.K. leaders tagged along and the West's mainstream news media mostly served as unprofessional propaganda conduits, not as diligent watchdogs for the public.

Today, we are seeing an even more dangerous repetition of this pattern: demonizing Russian President Vladimir Putin, destabilizing the Russian economy and pressing for "regime change" in Moscow. Amid the latest propaganda orgy against Putin, virtually no one in the mainstream is exercising any restraint or finding any cautionary lessons from the Iraqi and Libyan examples.

Yet, with Russia, the risks are orders of magnitude greater than even the cases of Iraq and Libya – and one might toss in the messy "regime change" projects in Ukraine and Syria. The prospect of political chaos in Moscow – with extremists battling for power and control of the nuclear codes – should finally inject some sense of responsibility in the West's politicians and media, but doesn't.

When it comes to Putin and Russia, it's the same ole hyperbole and falsehood that so disinformed the public regarding the "threats" from Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi. Just as President George W. Bush deceptively painted Hussein's supposed WMD as a danger to Americans and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dishonestly portrayed Gaddafi as "genocidal," U.S. officials and pundits are depicting Putin as some cartoonish villain or some new Hitler.

And, just as The New York Times, Washington Post and other mainstream media outlets amplified the Iraq and Libyan propaganda to the American people – rather than questioning and challenging it – these supposedly journalistic entities are performing the same function regarding Russia. The chief difference is that now we're talking about the potential for nuclear annihilation. [See Consortiumnews.com's ["The Existential Madness of Putin-Bashing."](#)]

According to the new U.K. report on Libya, Britain's military intervention – alongside the U.S. and France – was based on "erroneous assumptions and an incomplete understanding" of the reality inside Libya, which included a lack of appreciation about the role of Islamic extremists in spearheading the opposition to Gaddafi.

In other words, Gaddafi was telling the truth when he accused the rebels around Benghazi of being penetrated by Islamic terrorists. The West, including the U.S. news media, took Gaddafi's vow to wipe out this element and distorted it into a claim that he intended to slaughter the region's civilians, thus stampeding the United Nations Security Council into approving an operation to protect them.

That mandate was then twisted into an excuse to decimate Libya's army and clear the way for anti-Gaddafi rebels to seize the capital of Tripoli and eventually hunt down, torture and murder Gaddafi.

### **Ignored Terror Evidence**

Yet, there was evidence before this "regime change" occurred regarding the extremist nature of the anti-Gaddafi rebels as well as those seeking to overthrow Bashar al-Assad in Syria. As analysts Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman wrote in a pre-Libya-war report for West Point's Combating Terrorism Center, "the Syrian and Libyan governments share the United States' concerns about violent salafist/jihadi ideology and the violence perpetrated by its adherents."

In the report entitled "Al-Qaeda's Foreign Fighters in Iraq," Felter and Fishman also analyzed Al Qaeda's documents captured in 2007 showing personnel records of militants who flocked to Iraq for the war. The documents revealed that eastern Libya (the base of the anti-Gaddafi rebellion) was a hotbed for suicide bombers traveling to Iraq to kill American troops.

Felter and Fishman wrote that these so-called Sinjar Records disclosed that while Saudis comprised the largest number of foreign fighters in Iraq, Libyans represented the largest per-capita contingent by far. Those Libyans came overwhelmingly from towns and cities in the east.

"The vast majority of Libyan fighters that included their hometown in the Sinjar Records resided in the country's Northeast, particularly the coastal cities of Darnah 60.2% (53) and Benghazi 23.9% (21)," Felter and Fishman wrote, adding:

"Both Darnah and Benghazi have long been associated with Islamic militancy in Libya, in particular for an uprising by Islamist organizations in the mid-1990s. ... One group – the Libyan Fighting Group ... – claimed to have Afghan veterans in its ranks," a reference to mujahedeen who took part in the CIA-backed anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, as did Al Qaeda founder, Osama bin Laden, a Saudi.

"The Libyan uprisings [in the 1990s] became extraordinarily violent," Felter and Fishman wrote. "Qadhafi used helicopter gunships in Benghazi, cut telephone, electricity, and water supplies to Darnah and famously claimed that the militants 'deserve to die without trial, like dogs,'"

Some important Al Qaeda leaders operating in Pakistan's tribal regions also were believed to have come from Libya. For instance, "Atiyah," who was guiding the anti-U.S. war strategy in Iraq, was identified as a Libyan named Atiyah Abd al-Rahman.

It was Atiyah who urged a strategy of creating a quagmire for U.S. forces in Iraq, buying time for Al Qaeda's headquarters to rebuild its strength in Pakistan. "Prolonging the war [in Iraq] is in our interest," Atiyah said in a letter that upbraided Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi for his hasty and reckless actions in Iraq.

The Atiyah letter was discovered by the U.S. military after Zarqawi was killed by an airstrike in June 2006. [To view the "prolonging the war" excerpt in a translation published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, [click here](#). To read the entire letter, [click here](#).]

### **Hidden Motives**

This reality was known by U.S. officials prior to the West's military intervention in Libya in 2011, yet opportunistic politicians, including Secretary of State Clinton, saw Libya as a stage to play out their desires to create muscular foreign policy legacies or achieve other aims.

Some of Clinton's now-public emails show that France's President Nicolas Sarkozy appeared to be more interested in protecting France's financial dominance of its former African colonies as well as getting a bigger stake in Libya's oil wealth than in the well-being of the Libyan people.

An April 2, 2011 [email](#) from Clinton's personal adviser Sidney Blumenthal explained that Gaddafi had plans to use his stockpile of gold "to establish a pan-African currency" and thus "to provide the Francophone African Countries with an alternative to the French franc."

Blumenthal added, "French intelligence officers discovered this plan shortly after the current rebellion began, and this was one of the factors that influenced President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to commit France to the attack on Libya." Another key factor, according to the email, was Sarkozy's "desire to gain a greater share of Libya oil production."

For Clinton, a prime motive for pushing the Libyan "regime change" was to demonstrate her mastery of what she and her advisers called "smart power," i.e., the use of U.S. aerial bombing and other coercive means, such as economic and legal sanctions, to impose U.S. dictates on other nations.

Her State Department [email exchanges](#) revealed that her aides saw the Libyan war as a chance to pronounce a "Clinton doctrine," but that plan fell through when President Obama seized the spotlight after Gaddafi's government fell in August 2011.

But Clinton didn't miss a second chance to take credit on Oct. 20, 2011, after

militants captured Gaddafi, sodomized him with a knife and then murdered him. Appearing on a TV interview, Clinton celebrated Gaddafi's demise with the quip, "we came; we saw; he died."

Clinton's euphoria was not long-lasting, however, as chaos enveloped Libya. With Gaddafi and his largely secular regime out of the way, Islamic militants expanded their power over the country. Some were terrorists, just as Gaddafi and the West Point analysts had warned.

One Islamic terror group attacked the U.S. consulate in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, killing U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American personnel, an incident that Clinton called the worst moment of her four-year tenure as Secretary of State.

As the violence spread, the United States and other Western countries abandoned their embassies in Tripoli. Once prosperous with many social services, Libya descended into the category of failed state with rival militias battling over oil and territory while the Islamic State took advantage of the power vacuum to establish a foothold around Sirte.

Though Clinton prefers to describe Libya as a "work in progress," rather than another "regime change failure," U.S. and U.N. efforts to impose a new "unity government" on Libya have met with staunch resistance from many Libyan factions. Since April, the so-called Government of National Accord has maintained only a fragile presence in Tripoli, in Libya's west, and has been rejected by Libya's House of Representatives (HOR), which functions from the eastern city of Tobruk.

Over the past few days, military forces loyal to Gen. Khalifa Haftar, who is associated with HOR in the east, seized control of several oil facilities despite angry protests from Western nations, including the U.S., U.K., and France. But Western nations have little credibility left inside Libya, which not only faced colonization in the past but has watched as the U.S.-U.K.-French military intervention in 2011 has led to widespread poverty, suffering and death.

### **Inept Intervention**

The U.K. report only underscores how deceptive and inept that intervention was. As described by the U.K. Guardian newspaper, then-Prime Minister "David Cameron's intervention in Libya was carried out with no proper intelligence analysis, drifted into an unannounced goal of regime change and shirked its moral responsibility to help reconstruct the country following the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, according to a scathing report by the foreign affairs select committee.

“The failures led to the country becoming a failed state on the verge of all-out civil war, the report adds. The report, the product of a parliamentary equivalent of the Chilcot inquiry into the Iraq war, closely echoes the criticisms widely made of [then-Prime Minister] Tony Blair’s intervention in Iraq, and may yet come to be as damaging to Cameron’s foreign policy legacy.”

Earlier this year, Cameron stepped down as prime minister following the approval of the “Brexit” referendum calling on the U.K. to leave the European Union, a position that Cameron opposed. This week, Cameron also resigned his seat in Parliament.

Though Blair and Cameron have at least faced personal disgrace over their roles in these two failed “regime change” invasions, there has been less accountability in the United States, where there were no comprehensive examinations of the policy failures that led to the wars in Iraq and Libya (although studies were undertaken regarding Bush’s false claims about Iraq’s WMD and the Obama administration’s failure to adequately protect the U.S. consulate in Benghazi).

There has been even less accountability in the mainstream U.S. news media, where, for instance, The Washington Post’s editorial page editor Fred Hiatt, who repeatedly reported Iraq’s non-existent WMD as flat fact remains in the same job today pushing similar over-the-top propaganda regarding Russia.

## **A New Cold War**

As with the fiascos in Iraq and Libya, U.S. policymakers continue to ignore or sideline American intelligence analysts who possess information that would cast doubt on the escalation of hostilities with Russia.

Even as the Obama administration has charted this new Cold War with Russia over the past two years – a prospect that could cost U.S. taxpayers trillions of dollars and carries the risk of thermonuclear war – there has been no National Intelligence Estimate getting a consensus judgment from America’s 16 intelligence agencies about how real the Russian threat is, according to intelligence sources.

One source said a key reason why an NIE had not been done was that U.S. policymakers wanted a more alarmist report than the intelligence analysts were willing to produce. “They call [the alarm about Russia] political, not factual,” the source said. “They weren’t going to do one, period. They can’t lie.”

The source added that the analysts would have to acknowledge how helpful Putin has been in a number of sensitive and strategic areas, such as securing Syria’s agreement to surrender its chemical weapons and convincing Iran to accept tight

limits on its nuclear program.

“Israel has nuclear weapons and a crazy leader,” the source said about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “If not for Putin, the guy may have used it [a nuclear bomb] in Iran. He [Putin] calmed things down in Syria. They [CIA analysts] aren’t that stupid. To tell the truth, you have to say he [Putin] saved the Middle East a lot of trouble.”

U.S. intelligence analysts also might have had to include their assessments regarding whether Syrian rebels – not Assad’s military – deployed sarin gas outside Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013, and whether an element of the Ukrainian military – not ethnic Russian rebels – shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014.

Those two propaganda themes blaming Syria and Russia, respectively, were promoted heavily by mainstream Western media and various Internet-based information warriors. The two themes have been central to the Western-backed “regime change” project in Syria and to the new Cold War with Russia. If U.S. intelligence analysts knocked down those themes in an NIE, valuable propaganda assets would be exposed and discredited.

Also, in the wake of the two British government reports undermining the propaganda that was used to justify “regime change” in Iraq and Libya, the blow to Western “credibility” if there were similar admissions about falsehoods regarding Syria and Russia could be devastating.

Instead, the hope of Official Washington is that the American public won’t catch on to the pattern of deception and that the people will continue to ignore the famous warning that President George W. Bush infamously garbled: “fool me once, shame on ... shame on you; fool me – you can’t get fooled again.”

**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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## Al Qaeda’s Ties to US-Backed Syrian Rebels

**Exclusive:** The U.S. is demanding the grounding of Syria’s air force but is resisting Russian demands that U.S.-armed rebels separate from Al Qaeda, a

possible fatal flaw in the new cease-fire, writes Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

The new ceasefire agreement between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, which went into effect at noon Monday, has a new central compromise absent from the earlier ceasefire agreement that the same two men negotiated last February. But it isn't clear that it will produce markedly different results.

The new agreement incorporates a U.S.-Russian bargain: the Syrian air force is prohibited from operating except under very specific circumstances in return for U.S.-Russian military cooperation against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, also known as Daesh, ISIS or ISIL. That compromise could be a much stronger basis for an effective ceasefire, provided there is sufficient motivation to carry it out fully.

The question, however, is whether the Obama administration is willing to do what would certainly be necessary for the agreement to establish a longer-term ceasefire at the expense of Daesh and Al Qaeda.

In return for ending the Syrian air force's operations, generally regarded as indiscriminate, and lifting the siege on the rebel-controlled sectors of Aleppo, the United States is supposed to ensure the end of the close military collaboration between the armed groups it supports and Al Qaeda, and join with Russian forces in weakening Al Qaeda.

The new bargain is actually a variant of a provision in the Feb. 27 ceasefire agreement: in return for Russian and Syrian restraints on bombing operations, the United States would prevail on its clients to separate themselves from their erstwhile Al Qaeda allies.

But that never happened. Instead the U.S.-supported groups not only declared publicly that they would not honor a "partial ceasefire" that excluded areas controlled by Al Qaeda's affiliate, then known as Nusra Front, but joined with Nusra Front and its close ally, Ahrar al Sham, in a major open violation of the ceasefire by seizing strategic terrain south of Aleppo in early April.

As the Kerry-Lavrov negotiations on a ceasefire continued, Kerry's State Department hinted that the U.S. was linking its willingness to pressure its Syrian military clients to separate themselves from Al Qaeda's forces in the northwest to an unspecified Russian concession on the ceasefire that was still being negotiated.

It is now clear that what Kerry was pushing for was what the Obama

administration characterized as the “grounding” of the Syrian air force in the current agreement.

### **Al Qaeda’s Ties**

Now that it has gotten that concession from the Russians, the crucial question is what the Obama administration intends to do about the ties between its own military clients and Al Qaeda in Aleppo and elsewhere in the northwest.

Thus far the primary evidence available for answering that question is two letters from U.S. envoy to the Syrian opposition Michael Ratney to opposition groups backed by the United States. The first letter, sent on Sept. 3, after most of the Kerry-Lavrov agreement had already been hammered out, appears to have been aimed primarily at reassuring those Syrian armed groups.

As translated by al-Monitor, it asserted, “Russia will prevent regime planes from flying, and this means there will not be bombing by the regime of areas controlled by the opposition, regardless of who is present in the area, including areas in which Jabhat Fateh al Sham [the new name adopted by Al Qaeda’s Nusra Front] has a presence alongside other opposition factions.”

Ratney confirmed that the U.S. would in return “offer Russia coordination from our side to weaken al Qaeda.” But he also assured U.S. clients that their interests would be protected under the new agreement.

“[W]e believe this ceasefire should be stronger,” he wrote, “because it should prevent Russia and the regime from bombing the opposition and civilians under the pretext that its striking Jabhat al Nusra.”

The Ratney letter makes no reference to any requirement for the armed opposition to move away from their Al Qaeda allies or even terminate their military relationships, and thus implied that they need not do so.

But in a follow-up letter, undated but apparently sent on Sept. 10, following the completion of the new Kerry-Lavrov agreement, Ratney wrote, “We urge the rebels to distance themselves and cut all ties with Fateh of Sham, formerly Nusra Front, or there will be severe consequences.”

The difference between the two messages is obviously dramatic. That suggests that one of the last concessions made by Kerry in the Sept. 9 meeting with Lavrov may have been that a message would be sent to U.S. military clients with precisely such language.

The totality of the two letters from Ratney underlines the reluctance of the United States to present an ultimatum to its Syrian clients, no matter how

clearly they are implicated in Al Qaeda operations against the ceasefire. Last spring, the State Department never publicly commented on the participation by the U.S.-supported armed groups in the Nusra Front offensive in violation of the ceasefire agreement, effectively providing political cover for it.

The decision by U.S.-supported armed groups in March to defy the ceasefire was taken in the knowledge that Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia had agreed to resupply the Nusra Front-led commands in the northwest and had even provided shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles to Nusra's close ally Ahrar al Sham.

### **Turkey's Dubious Role**

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent shift in policy toward rapprochement with Russia and his talk of ending the war in Syria are fueled by determination to prevent Syrian Kurds from establishing a unified Kurdistan along the Turkish border.

The Wilson Center's Henry Barkey, a leading specialist on Turkey, told a meeting sponsored by the Middle East Institute last week that Erdogan's Syria policy is "90 percent about the Kurds."

But Erdogan does not appear ready to pull the rug out from under Turkey's client groups in Syria. In fact, Turkey suddenly dialed back its rhetorical shift on Syria in July just when the newly renamed Jabhat Fateh al Sham revealed for the first time that it was about to launch its major offensive for Aleppo.

The domestic political context of U.S. Syrian policy remains strongly hostile to any joint U.S. operations with Russia that could affect U.S.-supported anti-Assad clients, even though it is now generally acknowledged that those forces are "marbled" with troops of Al Qaeda's franchise, especially in Aleppo.

During the spring and summer, Reuters, The Washington Post and other media outlets reported a string of complaints from the Pentagon and the CIA about Obama's plans to reach an agreement with Russia on Syria that would commit the United States to cooperate against Al Qaeda's Syrian franchise. These complaints argued that the Russians could not be trusted and that they intended to target U.S.-supported groups in a proxy war.

The real reasons for these attacks on the negotiations with Russia, however, were more parochial. The Pentagon is determined to maintain the line that Russia is a dangerous threat and should be firmly opposed everywhere. The CIA's clandestine service has long wanted a more aggressive program of military assistance for its Syrian clients, which would be a major CIA covert operation.

Thus, even though the new agreement calls for U.S. "coordination" with Russia of

air strikes against Al Qaeda forces, the Obama administration can be expected to raise objections whenever it sees that a proposed operation would come too close to targets associated with its clients. Otherwise, more leaks from opponents of the agreement in the Pentagon and CIA – or even in the State Department – would surely follow.

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## Post-9/11's Self-Inflicted Wounds

The damage done to U.S. foreign policy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks was largely self-inflicted, a case of wildly overreacting to Al Qaeda's bloody provocation, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

In thinking about the significance and consequences, a decade and a half later, of the terrorist attacks known as 9/11, it is best to begin with what the attacks did *not* mean – despite what voluminous commentary ever since the event might lead one to believe.

The attacks did not mark a major change in security threats faced by the United States or anyone else. Americans were not suddenly more in danger on Sept. 12, 2001 than they had been on Sept. 10, even though the reactions of many Americans would suggest that they were.

Nor was one spectacular, lethal and lucky shot to be equated with a larger threat that can be thought of in strategic terms, or with sudden revelation of such a threat. Those whose job was to assess such things, including those in U.S. officialdom, had communicated prior to 9/11 their clear understanding of the strategic threat represented by Bin Laden's variety of international terrorism.

September 2001 did not mark the advent of a substantially greater vulnerability of the U.S. homeland, and certainly not an existential one. The techniques involved were not at all comparable in that regard to the introduction of the long-range bomber and the intercontinental ballistic missile.

Nor did September 2001 mark the beginning of serious counterterrorist efforts by the United States, notwithstanding the larger amount of resources thrown at the

problem in the wake of 9/11. There was a lot of counterterrorism going on before, especially in the 1980s and continuing into the 1990s.

The available tools and elements of counterterrorism have remained essentially unchanged from those earlier periods, apart from a few technological developments such as those involving unmanned aerial vehicles.

The biggest changes brought about by 9/11 instead involved public perceptions and emotions, and consequently the political treatment of subjects that those perceptions and emotions involved. The politics riding on public fears have been far more consequential than any external reality about what terrorist groups are up to. And much of the public perceptions have been inaccurate, as indicated by the way those perceptions about terrorist threats changed from Sept. 10 to Sept. 12.

Even the public perceptions about terrorism have not been a one-way progression. There has been some of the same swinging of the pendulum of public preferences as seen after previous major terrorist incidents. Although the swing after 9/11 was substantially higher than usual, we have already seen some of the pendulum's return in the opposite direction.

### **Criminal Behavior**

Some measures taken and quietly accepted by Congressional overseers in the name of counterterrorism in the earliest years after 9/11, including bulk collection of electronic data by government agencies and torture of captives, later became subjects of controversy or condemnation.

The shock effect of 9/11 suddenly made the American public much more militant and more willing than before to assume costs and take risks in the name of national security. This was an emotional response, little diverted or contained by more sober calculation of what really would enhance national security, and with little attention to how some could exploit the emotions for other purposes.

The single most consequential result of all of this was the launching in 2003 of the war in Iraq. Although Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11, the surge in public militancy made it politically possible for the first time for neoconservatives to implement this longstanding item on their agenda.

The damage, including to matters related to U.S. national security, has been vast, including trillions in expenditures, the igniting of a continuing civil war in a major Middle Eastern state, the stoking of region-wide sectarian conflict, and – as far as terrorism is concerned – giving birth to the group now known as ISIS.

U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan was another legacy of 9/11, of course. Unlike Iraq, it was related to 9/11 with regard to Al Qaeda's presence in Afghanistan under the Taliban. But years ago, the intervention morphed from a counterterrorism operation into more of a nation-building operation. And now it has become America's longest war.

Concepts offered by the intelligentsia, and not just emotions felt by the public, have been substantially affected by 9/11. After much groping since the end of the Cold War for ways to characterize, in a satisfyingly simple manner, both an era and a global U.S. mission, the fight against terrorism finally seemed to fill the bill.

The unfortunate "war on terror" metaphor much affected policy discourse and thus policy itself. Counterterrorism came to be thought of in chiefly military terms, and conceiving of a war against a tactic meant a war without either geographic or temporal limits.

The aforementioned responses and effects will have more lasting consequences than the enhanced investigative powers, such as those in the Patriot Act, that have received much attention. There is natural resistance in American tradition and habits of thought to such enhancement. There is not comparable resistance to fighting endlessly a foreign menace, even a menace defined as a tactic.

The main legacy of 9/11 has been less anything that terrorists have done to us than what we have done to ourselves, and to others, in response. On balance the legacy has not been beneficial.

**Paul R. Pillar, in his 28 years at the Central Intelligence Agency, rose to be one of the agency's top analysts. He is author most recently of [Why America Misunderstands the World](#). (This article first appeared as [a blog post](#) at The National Interest's Web site. Reprinted with author's permission.)**

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## China and Russia Press Ahead, Together

The G20 summit in China marked a possible tectonic shift in global economic power, with China's President Xi pushing for a new model based on physical connectivity, like "One Belt, One Road," writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

This time the G20 *was different*. Intentionally so. The Chinese had prepared it

and planned it to be so. Yet, as always, with the G20 meetings, there was little that is tangible to show for it all. No big solutions. No “in the margins” progress on Syria, Ukraine, Yemen or on a supposed ploy to manage the oil market. Just the usual, pre-cooked, bland communiqué about the need for growth.

Mostly, participants rehearsed their familiar stances (this was so for the Syria and Ukraine discussions: Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande had a case of cold feet about talking to Russia’s Vladimir Putin without Ukraine’s Petro Poroshenko being present – as had originally been scheduled).

So, how was this G20 different? Well, if one listens carefully, one might just detect the footsteps of change – of a new “order” readying itself to step onto the stage (at the apposite moment). The sound of these footsteps was intentionally “softened” – designed to allow for a peaceful rise of a new global leadership. The watchword here was “change without upheaval.”

What was different was that it was distinctly *China’s G20*. China did not simply *host* the G20 for America to sweep in, give its “leadership” and stamp to proceedings, and then to fly off. China, at this G20, made it very plain that it was leading, and to make it clearer still, it made sure that the world should see that the guest of honor was the Russian President, and not the American President (who regrettably experienced some technical difficulties that marred his ceremonial arrival). There was a deeper purpose here: to underline strategic co-ordination with Russia in the context of the display of Chinese leadership.

Lest this careful G20 choreography pass unnoticed in the West, President Xi had telegraphed the essence of his G20 message when he addressed the Chinese Communist Party on the anniversary of its founding, a month or so earlier.

On that anniversary, President Xi told the party that: “The world is on the brink of radical changes. We see how the E.U. is gradually crumbling, and the U.S. economy is collapsing. This will end in a new world order.”

### **‘Critical Juncture’**

Xi said it again at the G20, when he told heads of state that the world was at a “critical juncture” owing to sluggish demand, volatile financial markets and feeble trade and investment levels. He warned against the current trend towards protectionism, and said that the threat derived from highly leveraged markets is grave.

He also did two further things: he suggested that globalization be defined more in a physical way, rather than in a Western financialized way. And he also

proposed that the rules of trade should not be the prerogative of the U.S. alone, but agreed by the G20 Trade Ministers jointly (a task which they began by trying to agree nine key principles).

Additionally, Xi successfully pressed for the G20 to set out the necessary reforms for international financial institutions – in essence pressing for a more just distribution of power and status in international financial organizations.

In short, as conventional monetary measures (such as “quantitative easing” or QE) and unconventional measures such bond purchases by Central Banks have proved so ineffective in stimulating growth (as noted explicitly by China’s deputy Finance Minister), and since growth drivers from previous rounds of technical progress have faded too, then China’s recipe of creating physical connectivity through the *OBOR (One Belt, One Road)* initiative would seem to be the more promising way to re-ignite global growth, Xi proposed.

This, together with new trade rules, and reform of the financial order (currently aligned to American and E.U. interests), might make “change without upheaval” possible – i.e. this was the best prospect for change without financial collapse and economic shock (China and Russia hope). Left unsaid is the corollary that without such policy realignments, both states foresee the inevitability of a further “shock,” similar to that of 2008.

Just to be clear – although softly said, both China and Russia are deprecating to the point of dire warnings of imminent crisis, the West’s mismanagement of the financial system, and of its over-reliance on further debt-driven financialized responses.

China is looking to physical investment, innovation and connectivity (maritime, rail, pipeline and electronic) to become the future drivers of growth, rather than more NIRP (negative interest rate policy), QE and bond purchasing. The West may not wholly disagree with Xi’s adverse diagnosis, but the latter has painted itself into a corner from which there is no obvious exit that does not risk triggering the very crisis that the West is seeking to kick further along the road. It sees “no alternative” (called “TINA” for “there is no alternative”).

And to be clear again, China is aligning the G20 against the American-claimed prerogative to set the rules of trade (through the TIPP and the TPP), and the ‘rules’ of the financial “system.” It seems that the G20 went along with both these Chinese proposals – Western “leadership” was an eroded asset at this G20.

**Not Deferring to America**

President Xi, therefore, has presented himself as a global leader who intends to take a lead, at least in economic matters, and not simply defer to the “indispensable nation” to hold the floor to itself.

Dmitry Kosyrev, a political analyst specializing on the Far East at the Russian news agency *RIA Novosti*, commenting on the summit in Hangzhou, wrote: “The whole idea of the peaceful rise of China is that this rise is not directed against any other country,” and this is reflected in the language: no fireworks, no harsh accusations.

But the soft language notwithstanding, “Xi’s G20” nonetheless amounts to a seismic shift in terms of Chinese policy (even if there is no “bang”): It represents the end for Deng Xiaoping’s maxim for China: that it should never take the lead, never reveal its true potential, and never overreach its potential. One could argue that Xi has just broken the maxim, on all three counts. China is taking a lead, reveling in its potential, and reaching ambitiously, with *OBOR* – One Belt, One Road.

So, what is one to make of this? The first point is that it is unlikely that the West is open to any such economic advice, and it is unlikely in any case, that it could extricate itself from its monetary policy “corner” – even if it wanted so to do. The West is more intent on preserving the *status quo*, rather than in changing it.

Secondly, China itself faces the complications of decades of debt and easy-money driven growth, plus the urgent (and difficult) need to transition away from its old manufacturing base. China’s own internal economic frailties may yet come to channel attention away from Xi’s macro-reform perspective; or, worse, China may yet find itself at the eye of the next financial crisis.

Thirdly, *OBOR* faces quite some resistance from states who fear being cast in China’s economic shadow. This may slow the unfolding of the *OBOR* project. Finally, America will never willingly yield its hold over the financial system – at least this side of a new global financial crisis.

But does this mean that “Xi’s G20” was of little consequence for the West? No, Chinese officials likely understand their own constraints very well. They probably recognize too that the *OBOR* might be a touch utopian. In short, the comments from Xi about the Western economy – a view also shared in senior quarters in Moscow, incidentally – suggest that both see some further economic or credit “shock” as inexorable.

President Xi very courteously and politely simply has pointed out that the West is wearing no clothes (its monetary tools are broken drums), and that a new

order will arise as a consequence. Its standard was struck at Hangzhou, and it seems that much of the G20 are gathering to its banner.

What may emerge in more concrete terms – it is too early to say – is the second strand to President Xi’s global vision. In his address to the *Chinese Communist Party*, Xi said that relations of Russia and China should *not* be confined solely to economic relations, but rather, these two states should create an alternative military alliance: “we are now witnessing the aggressive actions by the United States against Russia and China. I believe that Russia and China may form an alliance before which NATO will be powerless,” Xi said.

### **Military Partnership**

In effect, Xi offered Russia a military partnership with China, and predicted that Russia and China together might be the leading lights of the new global order. Countering Western coercion through its multi-dimensional tools of today’s hybrid warfare, in short, might be requisite to bringing the “new global order” into being – this seemed to be the thrust of Xi’s message.

It is to Russia, however, that one must look to for a preliminary outline of thinking for the post-financialized world. On July 25, President Putin, as William Engdahl has **highlighted**: “mandated that an economic group called the *Stolypin Club* prepare their proposals to spur a growth revival, to be presented to the government by the Fourth Quarter of this year. In doing so, Putin has rejected two influential liberal or neo-liberal economic factions [that associated with Alexei Kudrin, the former Finance Minister, and the Central Bank of Russia’s monetarist governor, Elvira Nabiullina], which had brought Russia into a politically and economically dangerous recession.”

The *Stolypin Club* was created by a group of Russian national economists in 2012 (named after Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin, Czar Nicholas II’s reformist PM) to draft comprehensive alternative strategies to lessen Russia’s dependence on the dollar world and to boost growth of the real economy. Engdahl writes:

“The Stolypin Group in many ways harkens back to the genius behind the German ‘economic miracle’ after 1871 ... Friederich List, the developer of the basic model of national economic development ... List’s national economy historical-based approach was in direct counter-position to the then-dominant British Adam Smith free trade school.

“List’s views were increasingly integrated into the German Reich economic strategy beginning under the Zollverein or German Customs Union in 1834, that unified one German internal domestic market. It created the basis by the 1870’s for the most colossal emergence of Germany as an economic rival, exceeding Great

Britain in every area by 1914.”

A broad indication of this thinking centers around building on Russia’s traditional economic strengths – even if this requires a certain amount of initial tariff protection for those industries and government-directed low-cost loans. Sergei Glazyev’s (a prominent member of the *Stolypin Club*) 2015 plan, presented to the Russian Security Council, proposed to use Central Bank resources to provide targeted lending for businesses and industries by providing them with low subsidized interest rates, between 1-4 percent.

### **‘On-shoring’ Industries**

The program also suggested that the state support private business through the creation of “reciprocal obligations” for the purchase of products and services at agreed-upon prices. In short, it emphasized greater economic autonomy, aimed at lessening Russia’s vulnerability to external economic shock, or to geo-financial warfare. It is, in a word, all about “on-shoring” of industry and assets.

It is also about moving toward a sovereign monetary policy. As Engdahl has written, Glazyev proposed that the Ruble build up its strength as an alternative to the dollar system by buying gold as currency backing. He proposed that the Central Bank be mandated to buy all gold production of Russian mines at a given price, in order to increase the ruble gold backing. (Russia today is the world’s second largest gold producer.)

Earlier, this May, President Putin, speaking at the *Economic Council* Presidium, said as guidance to the Council: “The current dynamic shows us that the reserves and resources that served as driving forces for our economy at the start of the 2000’s no longer produce the effects they used to. I have said in the past, and want to stress this point again now, *economic growth does not get underway again all on its own*. If we do not find new growth sources, we will see GDP growth of around zero, and then our possibilities in the social sector, national defense and security, and in other areas, will be considerably lower than what is needed for us to really develop the country and make progress.”

It is not hard to perceive the deep convergence between Putin’s mandate to the Economic Council, and the message from President Xi to the G20. What is particularly interesting, is that Putin seems to be leaning toward a national economic model – despite all the understandable Russian shying away from anything smacking of a return to Soviet Gosplan central planning.

But the key phrase surely is: “I have said in the past, and want to stress this point again now, *economic growth does not get underway again all on its own*.”

Xi is saying the same. This is the direction in which the new wind is blowing: a different economics, global de-financialization coupled with (real economy) trading inter-connectivity.

**Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum, which advocates for engagement between political Islam and the West, where this article originally appeared,**  
<http://www.conflictsforum.org/2016/xis-g20-and-a-world-on-the-brink-of-radical-change/>.

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## The Existential Madness of Putin-Bashing

**Exclusive:** Official Washington loves its Putin-bashing but demonizing the Russian leader stops a rational debate about U.S.-Russia relations and pushes the two nuclear powers toward an existential brink, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

Arguably, the nuttiest neoconservative idea – among a long list of nutty ideas – has been to destabilize nuclear-armed Russia by weakening its economy, isolating it from Europe, pushing NATO up to its borders, demonizing its leadership, and sponsoring anti-government political activists inside Russia to promote “regime change.”

This breathtakingly dangerous strategy has been formulated and implemented with little serious debate inside the United States as the major mainstream news media and the neocons’ liberal-interventionist sidekicks have fallen in line much as they did during the run-up to the disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Except with Russia, the risks are even greater – conceivably, a nuclear war that could exterminate life on the planet. Yet, despite those stakes, there has been a cavalier – even goofy – attitude in the U.S. political/media mainstream about undertaking this new “regime change” project aimed at Moscow.

There is also little appreciation of how lucky the world was when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991 without some Russian extremists seizing control of the nuclear codes and taking humanity to the brink of extinction. Back then, there was a mix of luck and restrained leadership, especially on the Soviet side.

Plus, there were at least verbal assurances from George H.W. Bush’s administration that the Soviet retreat from East Germany and Eastern Europe

would not be exploited by NATO and that a new era of cooperation with the West could follow the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Instead, the United States dispatched financial “experts” – many from Harvard Business School – who arrived in Moscow with neoliberal plans for “shock therapy” to “privatize” Russia’s resources, which turned a handful of corrupt insiders into powerful billionaires, known as “oligarchs,” and the “Harvard Boys” into well-rewarded consultants.

But the result for the average Russian was horrific as the population experienced a drop in life expectancy unprecedented in a country not at war. While a Russian could expect to live to be almost 70 in the mid-1980s, that expectation had dropped to less than 65 by the mid-1990s.

The “Harvard Boys” were living the high-life with beautiful women, caviar and champagne in the lavish enclaves of Moscow – as the U.S.-favored President Boris Yeltsin drank himself into stupors – but there were reports of starvation in villages in the Russian heartland and organized crime murdered people on the street with near impunity.

Meanwhile, Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush cast aside any restraint regarding Russia’s national pride and historic fears by expanding NATO across Eastern Europe, including the incorporation of former Soviet republics.

In the 1990s, the “triumphalist” neocons formulated a doctrine for permanent U.S. global dominance with their thinking reaching its most belligerent form during George W. Bush’s presidency, which asserted the virtually unlimited right for the United States to intervene militarily anywhere in the world regardless of international law and treaties.

### **How Despair Led to Putin**

Without recognizing the desperation and despair of the Russian people during the Yeltsin era – and the soaring American arrogance in the 1990s – it is hard to comprehend the political rise and enduring popularity of Vladimir Putin, who became president after Yeltsin abruptly resigned on New Year’s Eve 1999. (In declining health, Yeltsin died on April 23, 2007).

Putin, a former KGB officer with a strong devotion to his native land, began to put Russia’s house back in order. Though he collaborated with some oligarchs, he reined in others by putting them in jail for corruption or forcing them into exile.

Putin cracked down on crime and terrorism, often employing harsh means to restore order, including smashing Islamist rebels seeking to take Chechnya out

of the Russian Federation.

Gradually, Russia regained its economic footing and the condition of the average Russian improved. By 2012, Russian life expectancy had rebounded to more than 70 years. Putin also won praise from many Russians for reestablishing the country's national pride and reasserting its position on the world stage.

Though a resurgent Russia created friction with the neocon designs for permanent U.S. world domination, Putin represented a side of Russian politics that favored cooperation with the West. He particularly hoped that he could work closely with President Barack Obama, who likewise indicated his desire to team up with Russia to make progress on thorny international issues.

In 2012, Obama was overheard on an open mike telling Putin's close political ally, then-President Dmitri Medvedev, that "after my election, I have more flexibility," suggesting greater cooperation with Russia. (Because of the Russian constitution barring someone from serving more than two consecutive terms as president, Medvedev, who had been prime minister, essentially swapped jobs with Putin for four years.)

Obama's promise was not entirely an empty one. His relationship with the Russian leadership warmed as the two powers confronted common concerns over security issues, such as convincing Syria to surrender its chemical-weapons arsenal in 2013 and persuading Iran to accept tight limitations on its nuclear program in 2014.

In an extraordinary op-ed in The New York Times on Sept. 11, 2013, Putin described his relationship with Obama as one of "growing trust" while disagreeing with the notion of "American "exceptionalism." In the key last section that he supposedly wrote himself, Putin said:

"My working and personal relationship with President Obama is marked by growing trust. I appreciate this. I carefully studied his address to the nation on Tuesday. And I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States' policy is 'what makes America different. It's what makes us exceptional.'

"It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal."

**Offending the Neocons**

Though Putin may have thought he was simply contributing to a worthy international debate in the spirit of the U.S. Declaration of Independence's assertion that "all men are created equal," his objection to "American exceptionalism" represented fighting words to America's neocons.

Instead of engaging in mushy multilateral diplomacy, muscular neocons saw America as above the law and lusted for bombing campaigns against Syria and Iran – with the goal of notching two more "regime change" solutions on their belts.

Thus, the neocons and their liberal-interventionist fellow-travelers came to see Putin as a major and unwelcome obstacle to their dreams of permanent U.S. dominance over the planet, which they would promote through what amounted to permanent warfare. (The main distinction between neocons and liberal interventionists is that the former cites "democracy promotion" as its rationale and the latter justifies war under the mantle of "humanitarianism.")

Barely two weeks after Putin's op-ed in the Times, a prominent neocon, Carl Gershman, the longtime president of the U.S.-government-funded National Endowment for Democracy, issued what amounted to a rejoinder in The Washington Post on Sept. 26, 2013.

Gershman's op-ed made clear that U.S. policy should take aim at Ukraine, a historically and strategically sensitive country on Russia's doorstep where the Russian nation made a stand against the Tatars in the 1600s and where the Nazis launched Operation Barbarossa, the devastating 1941 invasion which killed some 4 million Soviet soldiers and led to some 26 million Soviet dead total.

In the Post, Gershman wrote that "Ukraine is the biggest prize," but made clear that Putin was the ultimate target: "Ukraine's choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents. Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

To advance this cause, NED alone was funding scores of projects that funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars to Ukrainian political activists and media outlets, creating what amounted to a shadow political structure that could help stir up unrest when the Ukrainian government didn't act as desired, i.e., when elected President Viktor Yanukovich balked at a European economic plan that included cuts in pensions and heat subsidies as demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

When Yanukovich sought more time to negotiate a less onerous deal, U.S.-backed protests swept into Kiev's Maidan square. Though representing genuine sentiment among many western Ukrainians for increased ties to Europe, neo-Nazi and ultra-

nationalist street fighters gained control of the uprising and began firebombing police.

Despite the mounting violence, the protests were cheered on by neocon Sen. John McCain, U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt and Assistant Secretary of State for Europe Victoria Nuland, the wife of neocon stalwart Robert Kagan, a co-founder of the Project for the New American Century, which was a major promoter of the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In a speech to Ukrainian business leaders on Dec. 13, 2013, Nuland reminded them that the United States had invested \$5 billion in their “European aspirations.” By early February 2014, in an intercepted phone call, she was discussing with Pyatt who should lead a new government – “Yats is the guy,” she declared referring to Arseniy Yatsenyuk. Nuland and Pyatt continued the conversation with exchanges about how to “glue this thing” or “midwife this thing,” respectively.

### **A Western-backed Putsch**

The violence worsened on Feb. 20, 2014, when mysterious snipers opened fire on police and demonstrators sparking clashes that killed scores, including police officers and protesters. Though later evidence suggested that the shootings were a provocation by the neo-Nazis, the immediate reaction in the mainstream Western media was to blame Yanukovych.

Though Yanukovych agreed to a compromise on Feb. 21 that would reduce his powers and speed up new elections so he could be voted out of office, he was still painted as a tyrannical villain. As neo-Nazi and other rightists chased him and his government from power on Feb. 22, the West hailed the unconstitutional putsch as “legitimate” and a victory for “democracy.”

The coup, however, prompted resistance from ethnic Russian areas of Ukraine, particularly in the east and south. With the aid of Russian troops who were stationed at the Russian naval base in Sevastopol, the Crimeans held a referendum and voted by 96 percent to leave Ukraine and rejoin the Russian Federation, a move accepted by Putin and the Kremlin.

However, the West’s mainstream media called the referendum a “sham” and Crimea’s secession from Ukraine became Putin’s “invasion” – although the Russian troops were already in Crimea as part of the basing agreement and the referendum, though hastily organized, clearly represented the overwhelming will of the Crimean people, a judgment corroborated by a variety of subsequent polls.

Ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine also rose up against the new regime in Kiev, prompting more accusations in the West about “Russian aggression.” Anyone who raised the possibility that these areas, Yanukovych’s political strongholds,

might simply be rejecting what they saw as an illegal political coup in Kiev was dismissed as a “Putin apologist” or a “Moscow stooge.”

While Official Washington and its mainstream media rallied the world in outrage against Putin and Russia, the new authorities in Kiev slipped Nuland’s choice, Yatsenyuk, into the post of prime minister where he pushed through the onerous IMF “reforms,” making the already hard lives of Ukrainians even harder. (The unpopular Yatsenyuk eventually resigned his position.)

Despite the obvious risks of supporting a putsch on Russia’s border, the neocons achieved their political goal of driving a huge wedge between Putin and Obama, whose quiet cooperation had been so troublesome for the neocon plan for violent “regime change” in Syria and Iran.

The successful neocon play in Ukraine also preempted possible U.S.-Russian cooperation in trying to impose an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that would have established a Palestinian state and would have stymied Israel’s plans for gobbling up Palestinian territory by expanding Jewish settlements and creating an apartheid-style future for the indigenous Arabs, confining them to a few cantons surrounded by de facto Israeli territory.

Obama’s timid failure to explain and defend his productive collaboration with Putin enabled the neocons to achieve another goal of making Putin an untouchable, a demonized foreign leader routinely mocked and smeared by the mainstream Western news media. Along with Putin’s demonization, the neocons have sparked a new Cold War that will not only extend today’s “permanent warfare” indefinitely but dramatically increase its budgetary costs with massive new investments in strategic weapons.

### **Upping the Nuclear Ante**

By targeting Putin and Russia, the neocons have upped the ante when it comes to their “regime change” agenda. No longer satisfied with inflicting “regime change” in countries deemed hostile to Israel – Iraq, Syria, Libya, Iran, etc. – the neocons have raised their sights on Russia.

In that devil-may-care approach, the neocons are joined by prominent “liberal interventionists,” such as billionaire currency speculator George Soros, who pulls the strings of many “liberal” organizations that he bankrolls.

In February 2015, Soros laid out his “Russia-regime-change” vision in the liberal New York Review of Books with an alarmist call for Europe “to wake up and recognize that it is under attack from Russia” – despite the fact that it has been NATO encroaching on Russia’s borders, not the other way around.

But Soros's hysteria amounted to a clarion call to his many dependents among supposedly independent "non-governmental organizations" to take up the goal of destabilizing Russia and driving Putin from office. As a currency speculator, Soros recognizes the value of inflicting economic pain as well as military punishment on a target country.

"The financial crisis in Russia and the body bags [of supposedly Russian soldiers] from Ukraine have made President Putin politically vulnerable," Soros wrote, urging Europe to keep up the economic pressure on Russia while working to transform Ukraine into an economic/political success story, saying:

"...if Europe rose to the challenge and helped Ukraine not only to defend itself but to become a land of promise, Putin could not blame Russia's troubles on the Western powers. He would be clearly responsible and he would either have to change course or try to stay in power by brutal repression, cowing people into submission. If he fell from power, an economic and political reformer would be likely to succeed him."

But Soros recognized the other possibility: that a Western-driven destabilization of Russia and a failed state in Ukraine could either bolster Putin or lead to his replacement by an extreme Russian nationalist, someone far-harder-line than Putin.

With Ukraine's continued failure, Soros wrote, "President Putin could convincingly argue that Russia's problems are due to the hostility of the Western powers. Even if he fell from power, an even more hardline leader like Igor Sechin or a nationalist demagogue would succeed him."

Yet, Soros fails to appreciate how dangerous his schemes could be to make Russia's economy scream so loudly that Putin would be swept aside by some political upheaval. As Soros suggests, the Russian people could turn to an extreme nationalist, not to some pliable Western-approved politician.

### **Protecting Mother Russia**

Especially after suffering the depravations of the Yeltsin years, the Russian people might favor an extremist who would take a tough stance against the West and might see brandishing the nuclear arsenal as the only way to protect Mother Russia.

Still, Official Washington can't get enough of demonizing Putin. A year ago, Obama's White House – presumably to show how much the President disdains Putin, too – made fun of how Putin sits with his legs apart.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest cited a photo of the Russian president

sitting next to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “President Putin was striking a now-familiar pose of less-than-perfect posture and unbuttoned jacket and, you know, knees spread far apart to convey a particular image,” Earnest said, while ignoring the fact that Netanyahu was sitting with his legs wide apart, too.

Amid this anything-goes Putin-bashing, The New York Times, The Washington Post and now Hillary Clinton’s campaign have escalated their anti-Putin rhetoric, especially since Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump has offered some praise of Putin as a “strong” leader.

Despite the barrage of cheap insults emanating from U.S. political and media circles, Putin has remained remarkably cool-headed, refusing to react in kind. Oddly, as much as the American political/media establishment treats Putin as a madman, Official Washington actually counts on his even-temper to avoid a genuine existential crisis for the world.

If Putin were what the U.S. mainstream media and politicians describe – a dangerous lunatic – the endless baiting of Putin would be even more irresponsible. Yet, even with many people privately realizing that Putin is a much more calculating leader than their negative propaganda makes him out to be, there still could be a limit to Putin’s patience.

Or the neocons and liberal hawks might succeed in provoking a violent uprising in Moscow that ousts Putin. However, if that were to happen, the odds – as even Soros acknowledges – might favor a Russian nationalist coming out on top and thus in control of the nuclear codes.

In many ways, it’s not Putin who should worry Americans but the guy that might follow Putin.

**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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## Pushing NATO to Russia’s Southern Flank

**Exclusive:** In pursuit of a new Cold War with Russia, Official Washington wants to expand NATO into the ex-Soviet republic of Georgia, creating the potential for nuclear war to protect a sometimes reckless “ally,” writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

A Republican leader calling for a new military base in Georgia is hardly newsworthy – the state already has more than a dozen such installations. But when it's the speaker of parliament in the country of Georgia, who belongs to that nation's Republican Party calling for a U.S. military base on Russia's southern border, and for a constitutional amendment to guarantee his country's commitment to NATO, that should raise some eyebrows.

Although major U.S. papers didn't report that news this month, it reflects another escalation of NATO's dangerous confrontation with Moscow. Eight years ago, Georgia's intense campaign to join NATO – combined with its reckless aggression against the breakaway territory of South Ossetia – helped spark a brief but bloody war with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Today, the U.S.-led military alliance is once again promoting its expansion plans in Georgia and other countries on Russia's periphery as if the Cold War had never ended.

On Sept. 7, ambassadors from all the NATO countries drove along George W. Bush Avenue to downtown Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, to meet with Georgian leaders about security cooperation and progress toward the country's full integration into NATO.

At the end of the two-day visit, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared "the bonds between NATO and Georgia are stronger than ever." His news release noted that "the Alliance is committed to helping Georgia move towards NATO membership," and that "NATO experts in Georgia are providing advice on defense planning, education and cyber security, while Allies have increased joint training and exercises with Georgian troops."

Just days earlier, the U.S. Marine Corps announced that it had joined "NATO allies and partners from the Baltics and Black Sea regions" in the Republic of Georgia to conduct live-fire military exercises with heavy tanks, armored vehicles, and anti-armor TOW missiles. And in July, Secretary of State John Kerry visited Georgia before joining President Obama at a NATO meeting in Poland to sign a new security cooperation agreement with Georgia.

All of these moves followed President Obama's request to Congress in February to quadruple U.S. military spending in Europe next year, including military equipment to help Georgia in "countering Russian aggression." Days later, NATO dispatched ships and sailors to Georgia for joint naval exercises in the Black Sea.

Moscow's ambassador to NATO complained, "NATO is trying to draw us into a state

of Cold War by inflating the myth about the threat from the East and justifying the necessity to deter Russia.”

### **NATO and the Roots of Conflict**

NATO’s relentless expansion toward Russia – in violation of promises by Western leaders a quarter century ago – is a major cause of recent dangerous military escalation by the world’s major nuclear powers. In 2008, NATO extended membership invitations to both Georgia and Ukraine – two countries on Russia’s direct borders. George Friedman, CEO of the private intelligence firm Stratfor, explained that year why Moscow reacted with such hostility:

“US Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton had promised the Russians that NATO would not expand into the former Soviet empire. That promise had already been broken in 1998 by NATO’s expansion to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic – and again in the 2004 expansion, which included not only the rest of the former Soviet satellites in what is now Central Europe, but also the three Baltic states, which had been components of the Soviet Union.

“The Russians had tolerated all that, but the discussion of including Ukraine in NATO represented to them a fundamental threat to Russia’s national security. It would, in their calculations, have rendered Russia indefensible and threatened to destabilize the Russian Federation itself. When the United States went so far as to suggest that Georgia be included as well, bringing NATO deeper into the Caucasus, the Russian conclusion – publicly stated – was that the United States in particular intended to encircle and break Russia.”

Conflict with Russia ensued that August when, according to official E.U. investigators, Georgia’s authoritarian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, ordered the shelling of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, massacring civilians (and Russian peacekeepers) with cluster munitions. The resulting five-day war with Russia killed 850 people and displaced 100,000.

South Ossetia and nearby Abkhazia had broken away from Georgia in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their inhabitants were alarmed by the fanatical nationalism of Georgia’s thuggish first president, who declared that subversive minorities “should be chopped up [and] burned out with a red-hot iron from the Georgian nation.” South Ossetia alone lost more than one percent of its population to Georgian arms in 1991 and 1992.

President Saakashvili’s attempt to retake that territory in 2008 reflected his understandable overestimation of Washington’s willingness to back him up. Perhaps he listened too much to his paid lobbyist Randy Scheunemann, a neoconservative leader and chief foreign policy adviser to U.S. presidential

candidate John McCain. Hardly had the war begun than McCain and other hawks rushed to blame Russia as the aggressor. The Arizona senator declared, “we are all Georgians.”

In addition, the New York Times observed just days after the war broke out, “The United States took a series of steps that emboldened Georgia: sending advisers to build up the Georgian military, including an exercise last month with more than 1,000 American troops; pressing hard to bring Georgia into the NATO orbit; championing Georgia’s fledgling democracy along Russia’s southern border; and loudly proclaiming its support for Georgia’s territorial integrity in the battle with Russia over Georgia’s separatist enclaves.”

Saakashvilli may also have calculated that Israel, a major arms supplier to Georgia, would use its political clout to get Washington to intervene against Russia. Georgia’s defense minister, a former Israeli, said “We are now in a fight against the great Russia, and our hope is to receive assistance from the White House because Georgia cannot survive on its own.”

The Bush administration airlifted 1,800 Georgian troops from Iraq and guarded Tbilisi airport against Russian attack but did not save invading Georgian forces from defeat.

### **Fueling a New Cold War**

Although Russia came out ahead, some Russian analysts concluded that their failure to teach Georgian leaders enough of a lesson in 2008 contributed to the recent conflict in Ukraine, where a violent putsch in 2014 installed an anti-Russian regime bent on joining NATO. As one Russian expert at Moscow State University observed last year:

“The Saakashvili regime survived, it was not punished. What is happening in Ukraine is a direct result of the fact that in 2008 we did not pursue things in Georgia to the end. The junta in Kiev feels that it has absolute impunity, it is confident that Russia will not overthrow and punish it. That is why it is so brazen. And the West, seeing that Russia did not stick it out to the end, decided that it can do what it wants in Ukraine.”

(Lending support to that view, former President Saakashvili decamped last year for Ukraine, after being charged at home with a variety of offenses including embezzlement, violent crackdowns on opposition protests and the illegal seizure of a critical TV channel. The Kiev regime appointed him governor of the Odessa region and he has since become a major national political figure.)

In the West, the 2008 war fueled more anti-Russian sentiment, despite the consensus of most authorities that Georgia initiated the conflict. NATO roundly

condemned Russia for recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, setting the stage for continued tension for Moscow. In 2009, the newly elected President Obama began a training program for Georgian military forces.

In 2011, McCain's buddy, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, engineered a unanimous voice vote of the U.S. Senate to condemn Russia for recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (a vote that scandalized not only Moscow but conservative commentator Patrick Buchanan).

The same year, Hollywood actors Andy Garcia (playing Saakashvili), Val Kilmer and Heather Graham starred in the movie bomb "5 Days of War," co-produced by a Georgian minister, about "a small country fighting for independence and freedom."

Meanwhile, the neo-conservative opinion editors of the *Washington Post* have stoked the fires by running columns championing Georgia's "enthusiastic embrace of Westernization," its key role as a bulwark against Russian "domination" and "hegemony," and the importance of hastening its entry into NATO.

The *Post* even ran a column by Saakashvili brazenly accusing Putin of trying to conquer Georgia in 2008, citing parallels with Nazi Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938. The paper's own editorial writers call for "tougher sanctions" against Russia to "deter Mr. Putin from taking further aggressive action" against Georgia and other neighboring countries.

Georgia's ability to glean so much fawning attention becomes less mysterious in light of the fact that it is one of the top 10 foreign spenders on lobbying in the United States, including a \$50,000 monthly retainer to the uber-lobbying firm, Podesta Group.

Among the few dissenters are foreign policy "realists" like the CATO Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter, who have the temerity to question the rationale for NATO in the post-Soviet age. Citing the cost and danger of growing U.S. commitments to that alliance, he wrote last month, *a propos* of countries like Georgia:

"The only thing worse than committing the United States to defend a small, weak, largely useless ally is doing so when that ally is highly vulnerable to another major power. . . Alliances with such client states are perfect transmission belts to transform a local, limited conflict into a global showdown between nuclear-armed powers."

His words have gone largely unheeded. America's dangerous commitment to Georgia is taking place nominally in public but far below the radar of most voters. So let me propose a serious question for the next presidential debate: "What would you do, if you were elected, about Tbilisi?"

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including *The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic* (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles for Consortiumnews were “Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions”; “Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran”; “Saudi Cash Wins France’s Favor”; “The Saudis’ Hurt Feelings”; “Saudi Arabia’s Nuclear Bluster”; “The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”; and “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.” ]

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