

'Realists' Warn Against Ukraine Escalation

Exclusive: The neocons' war-and-more-war bandwagon is loaded up again and rolling downhill as "everyone who matters" in Washington is talking up sending sophisticated weapons to Kiev to escalate Ukraine's civil war, but some "realists," an endangered species in U.S. foreign policy, dissent, notes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

In recent years, Official Washington the politicians, the think tanks and the major news media has been dominated by neoconservatives and their sidekicks, the "liberal interventionists," with the old-school "realists" who favor a more measured use of American power largely marginalized. But finally, on the dangerous issue of Ukraine, some are speaking up.

Two of the few remaining "realists" with some access to elite opinion circles, Stephen M. Walt and John J. Mearsheimer, have written articles opposing the new hot idea in Washington to arm the Kiev regime so it can more efficiently kill ethnic Russians battling to expand their territory in eastern Ukraine.

As classic "realists," these two academics do not argue so much the moral issue of whether the eastern Ukrainians should be slaughtered in the Kiev regime's determination to crush all resistance to its authority or whether the U.S. support for last year's overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovich was justified. Instead, they focus on whether arming the Kiev regime makes sense for U.S. interests.

But what is most remarkable about the two articles one in Foreign Policy and the other in the New York Times opinion section is that they deviate from the relentless pro-escalation "group think" that has dominated the U.S. policy debate, across the board, on Ukraine. It's almost shocking to encounter two foreign policy experts who aren't on the latest rush-to-war bandwagon.

Granted, their arguments are relatively narrow, focusing on the likely consequences of shipping weapons to the unstable Kiev regime, but still such skepticism about the conventional wisdom is almost heretical these days.

In Foreign Policy, Walt notes that despite the emerging consensus to ship arms to Ukraine, "few experts think this bankrupt and divided country is a vital strategic interest and no one is talking about sending U.S. troops to fight on Kiev's behalf. So the question is: does sending Ukraine a bunch of advanced weaponry make sense? The answer is no."

Walt contends that many of the prominent Washington figures advocating weapons shipments have been wrong before about the results of expanding NATO eastwards in the 1990s, predicting that the move would not threaten Russia and contribute to enduring peace in Europe.

“That prediction is now in tatters, alas, but these experts are now doubling down to defend a policy that was questionable from the beginning and clearly taken much too far,” Walt wrote. “As the critics warned it would, open-ended NATO expansion has done more to poison relations with Russia than any other single Western policy.”

Misreading Moscow

Walt also notes that the arm-Kiev advocates were misinterpreting Russia’s posture regarding Ukraine and thus were applying a “deterrence model” to a “spiral model” situation, i.e., that Russia was not the expansive and aggressive power that Germany was in the 1930s but rather a cornered and weakened ex-superpower fearful of what it views as encroachment against its dwindling sphere of influence.

In the case of an emerging power like Nazi Germany, deterrence would be the strategy to block its expansion, but a declining power like Russia believes that it is the one on the defensive and thus its reaction to an aggressive military response would be to increase its paranoia and thus create a spiral toward a worsening conflict and greater hostility, not toward a peaceful solution.

“When insecurity is the taproot of a state’s revisionist actions, making threats just makes the situation worse,” Walt wrote. “When the ‘spiral model’ applies, the proper response is a diplomatic process of accommodation and appeasement (yes, appeasement) to allay the insecure state’s concerns.

“Such efforts do not require giving an opponent everything it might want or removing every one of its worries, but it does require a serious effort to address the insecurities that are motivating the other side’s objectionable behavior.”

But the problem with Walt’s prescription is that it goes against the “group think” of Official Washington, which “knows” that Russian President Vladimir Putin is the new Hitler instigating the Ukraine crisis as part of some master plan to conquer much of eastern Europe and build a new Russian empire.

Though that scenario lacks any evidentiary support and goes against the facts of the Ukraine crisis which was actually instigated by the European Union and neocons in the Obama administration it is a storyline that nearly every important person in Washington believes. Which is what makes Walt’s accurate

assessment so startling.

Walt describes the dominant view as: "Vladimir Putin is a relentless aggressor who is trying to recreate something akin to the old Soviet empire, and thus not confronting him over Ukraine will lead him to take aggressive actions elsewhere. The only thing to do, therefore, is increase the costs until Russia backs down and leaves Ukraine free to pursue its own foreign policy.

"In addition to bolstering deterrence, in short, giving arms to Kiev is intended to coerce Moscow into doing what we want. Yet the evidence in this case suggests the spiral model is far more applicable. Russia is not an ambitious rising power like Nazi Germany or contemporary China; it is an aging, depopulating, and declining great power trying to cling to whatever international influence it still possesses and preserve a modest sphere of influence near its borders, so that stronger states, and especially the United States, cannot take advantage of its growing vulnerabilities.

"Putin & Co. are also genuinely worried about America's efforts to promote 'regime change' around the world, including Ukraine, a policy that could eventually threaten their own positions. It is lingering fear, rather than relentless ambition, that underpins Russia's response in Ukraine.

"Moreover, the Ukraine crisis did not begin with a bold Russian move or even a series of illegitimate Russian demands; it began when the United States and European Union tried to move Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and into the West's sphere of influence. That objective may be desirable in the abstract, but Moscow made it abundantly clear it would fight this process tooth and nail.

"U.S. leaders blithely ignored these warnings, which clearly stemmed from Russian insecurity rather than territorial greed, and not surprisingly they have been blindsided by Moscow's reaction. The failure of U.S. diplomats to anticipate Putin's heavy-handed response was an act of remarkable diplomatic incompetence, and one can only wonder why the individuals who helped produce this train wreck still have their jobs."

Safety in Numbers

But the reason that people like Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt, who helped plot the overthrow of the Yanukovich government a year ago, is that they represent the neocon/liberal-interventionist dominance of Official Washington. That's also why key media advocates for the Iraq War, like the Washington Post's Fred Hiatt and the New York Times' Thomas L. Friedman, still have their jobs; they ran with the powerful herd and are proof that there really is safety in numbers.

Citing the “spiral model,” Walt warns that the current popular idea of arming the Kiev forces “will only make things worse. It certainly will not enable Ukraine to defeat the far stronger Russian army; it will simply intensify the conflict and add to the suffering of the Ukrainian people.

“Nor is arming Ukraine likely to convince Putin to cave in and give Washington what it wants. Ukraine is historically linked to Russia, they are right next door to each other, Russian intelligence has long-standing links inside Ukraine’s own security institutions, and Russia is far stronger militarily. Even massive arms shipments from the United States won’t tip the balance in Kiev’s favor, and Moscow can always escalate if the fighting turns against the rebels, as it did last summer.”

Walt also saw danger signs around Washington’s take-it-or-leave-it style of negotiating, rather than trying to reach a solution that would work for both sides. He wrote:

“Instead of engaging in genuine bargaining, American officials tend to tell others what to do and then ramp up the pressure if they do not comply. Today, those who want to arm Ukraine are demanding that Russia cease all of its activities in Ukraine, withdraw from Crimea, and let Ukraine join the EU and/or NATO if it wants and if it meets the membership requirements. In other words, they expect Moscow to abandon its own interests in Ukraine, full stop.”

Though the facts and logic rest with Walt’s argument, he is confronting one of the most single-minded “group thinks” in modern U.S. history, even more unquestioning than the certainty of 2002-2003 that Iraq possessed WMDs and was about to share them with al-Qaeda.

A Second Voice

Similarly, Mearsheimer warns that the idea of shipping advanced weaponry to Ukraine “would be a huge mistake for the United States, NATO and Ukraine itself. Sending weapons to Ukraine will not rescue its army and will instead lead to an escalation in the fighting. Such a step is especially dangerous because Russia has thousands of nuclear weapons and is seeking to defend a vital strategic interest.

“Because the balance of power decisively favors Moscow, Washington would have to send large amounts of equipment for Ukraine’s army to have a fighting chance. But the conflict will not end there. Russia would counter-escalate, taking away any temporary benefit Kiev might get from American arms.

“Proponents of arming Ukraine have a second line of argument. The key to success, they maintain, is not to defeat Russia militarily, but to raise the

costs of fighting to the point where Mr. Putin will cave. The pain will supposedly compel Moscow to withdraw its troops from Ukraine and allow it to join the European Union and NATO and become an ally of the West.

“This coercive strategy is also unlikely to work, no matter how much punishment the West inflicts. What advocates of arming Ukraine fail to understand is that Russian leaders believe their country’s core strategic interests are at stake in Ukraine; they are unlikely to give ground, even if it means absorbing huge costs.

“Great powers react harshly when distant rivals project military power into their neighborhood, much less attempt to make a country on their border an ally. This is why the United States has the Monroe Doctrine, and today no American leader would ever tolerate Canada or Mexico joining a military alliance headed by another great power.

“Russia is no exception in this regard. Thus Mr. Putin has not budged in the face of sanctions and is unlikely to make meaningful concessions if the costs of the fighting in Ukraine increase. The possibility that Mr. Putin might end up making nuclear threats may seem remote, but if the goal of arming Ukraine is to drive up the costs of Russian interference and eventually put Moscow in an acute situation, it cannot be ruled out. If Western pressure succeeded and Mr. Putin felt desperate, he would have a powerful incentive to try to rescue the situation by rattling the nuclear saber.”

In other words, the dominant neocon-to-liberal-hawk axis of Washington is pushing the United States into a dangerous confrontation that could easily be avoided if traditional diplomacy were allowed to work and the reasonable interests of the various parties were taken into account.

While the outer-limit endgame of the Ukraine crisis could be the ultimate endgame of nuclear war, the core issue in dispute is remarkably pedestrian the pace of Ukraine increasing its economic ties to the EU while maintaining many of its traditional business ties to Russia.

This disagreement should have been resolved fairly easily within the political structure of Ukraine’s constitutional process. In November 2013, President Yanukovich after learning that the cost of abruptly cutting ties to Russia would be a staggering \$160 billion asked for more time to work on the problem.

But, amid mass protests by western Ukrainians against Yanukovich’s decision, Nuland and other U.S. neocons saw an opportunity for another “regime change” and some neocons, like National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman, hoped that Ukraine could be the route toward ousting Russia’s Putin, who had

offended the neocons by opposing their “regime change” strategies for Syria and Iran. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Neocons’ Ukraine-Syria-Iran Gambit.”](#)]

After the coup ousting Yanukovich last Feb. 22, ethnic Russians in southern and eastern Ukraine resisted the new right-wing regime in Kiev, which was backed by neo-Nazi militias. Crimea’s leaders and voters opted for secession from the Ukrainian madhouse and Putin agreed to take the strategic peninsula back into Russia.

Ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine also rose up and were targeted by the Kiev regime for an “anti-terrorist operation,” which involved shelling their cities and unleashing brutal neo-Nazi brigades to go door-to-door killing suspected separatists. Conservative estimates of the death toll primarily among ethnic Russians now exceed 5,000 and some estimates are many times that number.

But Official Washington views the conflict almost entirely through the neocon prism of “Russian aggression” and “everyone who matters” is now intent on escalating the bloodshed by upgrading the lethality of Kiev’s arsenal. That’s why it’s startling to hear a couple of rare and “realist” voices of dissent.

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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

Finding Creative Ways to Torture

After World War II, Americans led the way in establishing landmark human rights principles, including a repudiation of torture. But more recent U.S. leaders have chosen to disgrace those ideals by devising euphemisms and end-runs to continue the barbaric practices, as Peter Costantini describes.

By Peter Costantini

“Enhanced interrogation”: the George W. Bush administration bureaucrats who coined the term had perfect pitch. The apparatchiks of Kafka’s Castle would have admired the grayness of the euphemism. But although it sounds like some new kind of focus group, it turns out that “enhanced interrogation” was just anodyne branding for good old-fashioned torture.

Unfortunately, the debate around it unleashed by the report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has largely missed the point.

Certainly, the report provided overwhelming evidence that torture did not produce useful intelligence. The CIA had concluded previously that torture is “ineffective,” “counterproductive,” and “will probably result in false answers.”

Some CIA agents and soldiers reportedly questioned the legality of the “enhanced interrogation” policies and resisted carrying them out. FBI agent Ali Soufan, who had legally interrogated prisoner Ali Zubaydah, has written that Zubaydah had cooperated and provided “important actionable intelligence” months before he was tortured extensively.

Historian Gareth Porter has used new evidence from the Senate report to refute the CIA’s claim that information obtained through torture “played a substantial role” in locating and killing al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. The CIA, he says, deceived the U.S. government and public on this point. In fact, Porter contends, the identification of bin Laden’s courier, which eventually led U.S. forces to bin Laden’s compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, “had nothing to do with the CIA torture program.”

Even a Bush Justice Department lawyer has acknowledged: “It is difficult to quantify with confidence and precision the effectiveness of the program.” In any case, it is impossible to know that intelligence purportedly extracted by torture could not have been elicited by legal interrogation.

Fundamentally, though, whether torture “works” or not is immaterial.

What’s the word? Nuremberg

The Third Geneva Convention and the UN Covenant Against Torture do not exempt torture that somebody believes to be “effective.” The codes are based on neither expediency nor compassion, but rather on hard-headed self-interest. Nearly all nations have formally recognized that by agreeing not to torture people they can reduce the probability of their own people being tortured.

Post-World War II tribunals imprisoned and executed German and Japanese officials for war crimes including torture. Nuremberg and Tokyo established the indelible principle that acting as a responsible government official, or following the orders of one, is not a defense against accusations of war crimes.

Granted, these norms have been observed as much in the breach as in practice. And on the blood-soaked canvas of the past century, the damages of torture pale beside the scope of suffering inflicted by the “legal” savageries of war. Yet if the leaders of the richest and most powerful empire in history can claim that

defense of the homeland requires torturing prisoners, what other government or non-state actor will hesitate to make the same claim?

Morally, the would-be civilized world continues to recognize torture as intrinsically venomous. It destroys lives on both ends of the cattle prod. The officials that ordered it and now defend it bolster the evidence that the Bush administration was a rogue régime. Dick Cheney, former vice president and current marketing director for the Spanish Inquisition, says: "I'd do it again in a minute." No one should doubt his sincerity.

The "New American Century" Goes Medieval

One of the "enhancements" was reportedly an effort to fabricate a justification for invading Iraq. High Bush administration officials allegedly put heavy pressure on interrogators "to find evidence of cooperation between al-Qaeda and the late Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's regime" in an effort to fabricate a justification for invading Iraq, according to a former senior U.S. intelligence official and a former Army psychiatrist cited by McClatchy News. No such evidence of cooperation was found.

But beyond such immediate imperatives, the torture policy meshed seamlessly with a discretionary war premised on lies and optimized for "shock and awe." This neat ideological package asserted the unchallengeable power of a "unitary executive" above constitutional checks and balances, national law, and international treaties. Echoing Richard Nixon's circular self-justification of three decades earlier, Justice Department lawyer Steven Bradbury told Congress: "The president is always right."

The Project for the New American Century, a think tank with which Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and other officials were associated, laid down intellectual covering fire for these policies. With the United States the only superpower left, the PNAC apparently concluded that history was over and that the Bush administration had an unprecedented opportunity to remake the world in its own image and demonstrate the futility of resistance.

The policies it engendered effectively said to the international community: "The rules we used to agree on no longer apply to us. Here's exactly how far above international law we are. What are you going to do about it?"

Strategically, the Bush-Cheney project targeted conceptual smart bombs on the very idea of human rights. The rest of the world got the message, and the cracks in the foundations of U.S. national security have yet to be repaired.

“Enhanced interrogation,” however, has roots reaching back decades into CIA collaboration with dictatorships in Latin America.

Brazil’s National Truth Commission recently concluded that from 1954 through 1996 the United States gave some 300 military officers “theoretical and practical classes in torture.” Current President Dilma Rousseff was one of those tortured by the military, which ruled the largest country in Latin America from 1964 through 1985.

Over the past half-century, the CIA has been implicated in providing similar training to military dictatorships across South and Central America. The United States also provided military aid and advice to many of them, participated in coups against elected governments, and was complicit in the murder and disappearance of hundreds of thousands, according to investigative journalist Robert Parry.

In Guatemala, for example, the CIA trained and supported a military and intelligence apparatus that exterminated close to 200,000 people over 30 years and committed genocide against Mayan communities, according to an independent Historical Clarification Commission. The military dictatorship initially came to power in a 1954 coup, planned, organized and executed by the CIA, that overthrew the elected government of President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán and killed hundreds of his supporters.

Under the Richard Nixon administration, the CIA was deeply involved in the 1973 coup in Chile, which overthrew the elected government of Salvador Allende and led to the torture, disappearance and death of thousands of Chileans.

Of course, none of these regimes needed to be shown how to torture prisoners. But the official trainings put the imprimatur of their sponsor to the north on their atrocities.

The origins of U.S. torture policies go back even further, to early in the Vietnam War. According to the Senate report, “In 1963, the CIA produced the KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation Manual, intended as a manual for Cold War Interrogations, which included the ‘principal coercive techniques of interrogation’.” In 1983, sections of KUBARK were incorporated into the Human Resource Exploitation Training Manual, which was “used to provide interrogation training in Latin America in the early 1980s.”

One of the CIA officers who provided these trainings was later “orally admonished for inappropriate use of interrogation techniques.” But his efforts ultimately proved to be a good career move. In 2002, the CIA made him chief of interrogations, according to the report.

In 1992, the Pentagon destroyed most documentation of these training programs, Parry reported. The orders came from the office of then Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.

Among the key players in these programs, historian Greg Grandin gives special mention to Jose A. Rodriguez Jr., head of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center for the George W. Bush Administration. Rodriguez reportedly was responsible for destroying tapes of torture and discouraging field agents from questioning the practices, and he continues to defend them.

Throwing Light on the Dark Side

In response to mounting evidence of decades of torture, what would an "indispensable nation" do?

The release of the Senate report was an important precedent. But what has been released so far is only the executive summary. The Senate should release the full report and encourage the Obama administration to act on it. Until perpetrators all the way to the top are brought to justice, the U.S. government will rightly be seen as hypocritical when it criticizes the human rights violations of others.

Ultimately, the gravity and scope of wrongdoing call for a reincarnation of the Senate's 1975 Church Committee, which investigated abuses by intelligence agencies in the wake of Watergate. It should serve as a truth commission exposing the U.S. government's use of torture, terror and other human rights violations, going back 40 years to where Church left off.

The official U.S. Senate history of the Church Committee cites historian Henry Steele Commager, referring to executive branch officials who seemed to consider themselves above the law: "It is this indifference to constitutional restraints that is perhaps the most threatening of all the evidence that emerges from the findings of the Church Committee."

Under the present Republican leadership, with the honorable exception of Senator John McCain, R-Arizona, it's a safe bet that nothing will happen on this front.

Allies, though, have begun digging. In 2009, Spanish jurist Baltasar Garzón Real opened two investigations of the Bush torture program, one of which is still pending. In December, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights in Berlin filed complaints accusing several high Bush administration figures of "the war crime of torture" under German and international law.

The odds of seeing Cheney and company in a glass booth may be slim. But it would be a small victory for humanity if they had to look over their shoulders

whenever they travel abroad.

As some of us never seem to learn, genuine national security is about not black ops and drones, but hearts and minds.

As an epitaph for the Bush-Cheney vision, consider Percy Bysshe Shelley's 1818 poem "Ozymandias":

I met a traveller from an antique land Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand, Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown, And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command, Tell that its sculptor well those passions read Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things, The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed: And on the pedestal these words appear: 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' Nothing beside remains. Round the decay Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Peter Costantini is a Seattle-based analyst who has covered Latin America for the past three decades.

Ronald Reagan's Torture

From the Archive: George W. Bush's torture policies may have been extraordinary in the direct participation of U.S. personnel but they were far from unique, with Ronald Reagan having followed a similar path in his anti-leftist wars in Central America, as Robert Parry reported in 2009.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on Sept. 8, 2009)

The 2004 CIA Inspector General's report, released in August 2009, referenced as "background" to the Bush-era abuses the spy agency's "intermittent involvement in the interrogation of individuals whose interests are opposed to those of the United States." The report noted "a resurgence in interest" in teaching those techniques in the early 1980s "to foster foreign liaison relationships."

The report said, "because of political sensitivities," the CIA's top brass in the 1980s "forbade Agency officers from using the word 'interrogation' and substituted the phrase "human resources exploitation" [HRE] in training programs for allied intelligence agencies.

The euphemism aside, the reality of these interrogation techniques remained brutal, with the CIA Inspector General conducting a 1984 investigation of

alleged “misconduct on the part of two Agency officers who were involved in interrogations and the death of one individual,” the report said (although the details were redacted in the version released to the public).

In 1984, the CIA also was hit with a scandal over what became known as an “assassination manual” prepared by agency personnel for the Nicaraguan Contras, a rebel group sponsored by the Reagan administration with the goal of ousting Nicaragua’s leftist Sandinista government.

Despite those two problems, the questionable training programs apparently continued for another two years. The 2004 IG report states that “in 1986, the Agency ended the HRE training program because of allegations of human rights abuses in Latin America.”

While the report’s references to this earlier era of torture are brief and the abuses are little-remembered features of Ronald Reagan’s glorified presidency there have been other glimpses into how Reagan unleashed this earlier “dark side” on the peasants, workers and students of Central America.

Project X

A sketchy history of the U.S. intelligence community’s participation in torture and other abuses surfaced in the mid-1990s with the release of a Pentagon report on what was known as “Project X,” a training program in harsh and anti-democratic practices which got its start in 1965 as the U.S. military build-up in Vietnam was underway.

The U.S. Army Intelligence Center and School at Fort Holabird, Maryland, began pulling together experiences from past counterinsurgency campaigns for the development of lesson plans which would “provide intelligence training to friendly foreign countries,” according to a brief history of Project X, which was prepared in 1991. Called “a guide for the conduct of clandestine operations,” Project X “was first used by the U.S. Intelligence School on Okinawa to train Vietnamese and, presumably, other foreign nationals,” the history stated. Linda Matthews of the Pentagon’s Counterintelligence Division recalled that in 1967-68, some of the Project X training material was prepared by officers connected to the so-called Phoenix program in Vietnam, an operation that involved targeting, interrogating and assassinating suspected Viet Cong.

“She suggested the possibility that some offending material from the Phoenix program may have found its way into the Project X materials at that time,” according to the Pentagon report. In the 1970s, the U.S. Army Intelligence Center and School moved to Fort Huachuca in Arizona and began exporting Project X material to U.S. military assistance groups working with “friendly foreign

countries." By the mid-1970s, the Project X material was going to military forces all over the world.

But Reagan's election in 1980 and his determination to crush leftist movements in Central America expanded the role of Project X.

In 1982, the Pentagon's Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence ordered the Fort Huachuca center to supply lesson plans to the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia, which human rights activists dubbed the School of the Assassins because it trained some of Latin America's most notorious military officers.

"The working group decided to use Project X material because it had previously been cleared for foreign disclosure," the Pentagon history stated. According to surviving documents released in the mid-1990s under a Freedom of Information Act request, the Project X lessons contained a full range of intelligence techniques. A 1972 listing of Project X lesson plans included electronic eavesdropping, interrogation, counterintelligence, break-ins and censorship. Citizens of a country were put on "'black, gray or white lists' for the purpose of identifying and prioritizing adversary targets." The lessons suggested creation of inventories of families and their assets to keep tabs on the population.

The manuals suggested coercive methods for recruiting counterintelligence operatives, including arresting a target's parents or beating him until he agreed to infiltrate a guerrilla organization. To undermine guerrilla forces, the training manuals countenanced "executions" and operations "to eliminate a potential rival among the guerrillas."

Cheney Intercedes

The internal U.S. government review of Project X began in 1991 when the Pentagon discovered that the Spanish-language manuals were advising Latin American trainees on assassinations, torture and other "objectionable" counter-insurgency techniques.

By summer 1991, the investigation of Project X was raising concerns inside George H.W. Bush's administration about an adverse public reaction to evidence that the U.S. government had long sanctioned and even encouraged brutal methods of repression.

But the PR problem was contained when the office of then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney ordered that all relevant Project X material be collected and brought to the Pentagon under a recommendation that most of it be destroyed.

The recommendation received approval from senior Pentagon officials, presumably with Cheney's blessings. Some of the more innocuous Project X lesson plans and the historical summary were spared, but the Project X manuals that dealt with the sensitive human rights violations were destroyed in 1992, the Pentagon reported. [For details, see Robert Parry's Lost History.]

Even after the Cold War ended, the United States refused to examine this ugly history in any systematic way. Though Democrat Bill Clinton was the first President elected after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he ignored calls for serious examinations of that historical era out of a desire to look forward, not backward.

However, public complaints about the mass slaughter of Guatemalan peasants by a Reagan-backed regime in the 1980s did prompt an examination by the President Intelligence Oversight Board, which issued a "Report on the Guatemala Review" in mid-1996.

The review found that CIA funding ranging from \$1 million to \$3.5 million was "vital" to the operations of the Guatemalan intelligence services including D-2 military intelligence and the "Archivos" unit, which was infamous for political torture and assassinations.

As the Oversight Board noted, the human rights records of the Guatemalan intelligence agencies "were generally known to have been reprehensible by all who were familiar with Guatemala." The report added:

"We learned that in the period since 1984, several CIA assets were credibly alleged to have ordered, planned, or participated in serious human rights violations such as assassination, extrajudicial execution, torture, or kidnapping while they were assets and that the CIA was contemporaneously aware of many of the allegations."

History of Slaughter

The Clinton administration also released documents in the late 1990s revealing the grim history of U.S. complicity in Guatemala's dirty wars that claimed an estimated 200,000 lives from the 1960s through the 1980s.

According to those documents, the original Guatemalan death squads took shape in the mid-1960s under anti-terrorist training provided by a U.S. public safety adviser named John Longon. Longon's operation within the Guatemalan presidential compound was the starting point for the "Archivos" intelligence unit.

Within weeks, the CIA was sending cables back to headquarters in Langley, Virginia, about the clandestine execution of several Guatemalan "communists and

terrorists" on the night of March 6, 1966.

By the end of the year, the Guatemalan government was bold enough to request U.S. help in establishing special kidnapping squads, according to a cable from the U.S. Southern Command that was sent to Washington on Dec. 3, 1966.

By 1967, the Guatemalan counterinsurgency terror had gained a fierce momentum. On Oct. 23, 1967, the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research noted the "accumulating evidence that the [Guatemalan] counterinsurgency machine is out of control."

The report noted that Guatemalan "counter-terror" units were carrying out abductions, bombings, torture and summary executions "of real and alleged communists."

The mounting death toll in Guatemala disturbed some American officials assigned to the country. The embassy's deputy chief of mission, Viron Vaky, expressed his concerns in a remarkably candid report that he submitted on March 29, 1968, after returning to Washington.

"The official squads are guilty of atrocities. Interrogations are brutal, torture is used and bodies are mutilated," Vaky wrote. "In the minds of many in Latin America, and, tragically, especially in the sensitive, articulate youth, we are believed to have condoned these tactics, if not actually encouraged them. Therefore our image is being tarnished and the credibility of our claims to want a better and more just world are increasingly placed in doubt."

Self-Deception

Vaky also noted the deceptions within the U.S. government that resulted from its complicity in state-sponsored terror.

"This leads to an aspect I personally find the most disturbing of all that we have not been honest with ourselves," Vaky said. "We have condoned counter-terror; we may even in effect have encouraged or blessed it. We have been so obsessed with the fear of insurgency that we have rationalized away our qualms and uneasiness.

"This is not only because we have concluded we cannot do anything about it, for we never really tried. Rather we suspected that maybe it is a good tactic, and that as long as Communists are being killed it is alright. Murder, torture and mutilation are alright if our side is doing it and the victims are Communists.

"After all hasn't man been a savage from the beginning of time so let us not be too queasy about terror. I have literally heard these arguments from our

people.”

Though kept secret from the American public for three decades, the Vaky memo obliterated any claim that Washington simply didn't know the reality in Guatemala. Still, with Vaky's memo squirreled away in State Department files, the killing went on.

The repression was noted almost routinely in reports from the field. On Jan. 12, 1971, for instance, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that Guatemalan forces had “quietly eliminated” hundreds of “terrorists and bandits” in the countryside. On Feb. 4, 1974, a State Department cable reported resumption of “death squad” activities.

On Dec. 17, 1974, a DIA biography of one U.S.-trained Guatemalan officer gave an insight into how U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine had imbued the Guatemalan strategies.

According to the biography, Lt. Col. Elias Osmundo Ramirez Cervantes, chief of security section for Guatemala's president, had trained at the U.S. Army School of Intelligence at Fort Holabird in Maryland. Back in Guatemala, Ramirez Cervantes was put in charge of plotting raids on suspected subversives as well as their interrogations.

The Reagan Bloodbath

As brutal as the Guatemalan security forces were in the 1960s and 1970s, the worst was yet to come. In the 1980s, the Guatemalan army escalated its slaughter of political dissidents and their suspected supporters to unprecedented levels.

Ronald Reagan's election in November 1980 set off celebrations in the well-to-do communities of Central America. After four years of President Jimmy Carter's human rights nagging, the region's hard-liners were thrilled that they had someone in the White House who understood their problems.

The oligarchs and the generals had good reason for optimism. For years, Reagan had been a staunch defender of right-wing regimes that engaged in bloody counterinsurgency against leftist enemies.

In the late 1970s, when Carter's human rights coordinator, Patricia Derian, criticized the Argentine military for its “dirty war” tens of thousands of “disappearances,” tortures and murders then-political commentator Reagan joshed that she should “walk a mile in the moccasins” of the Argentine generals before criticizing them. [For details, see Martin Edwin Andersen's *Dossier Secreto*.]

After his election in 1980, Reagan pushed to overturn an arms embargo imposed on

Guatemala by Carter. Yet as Reagan was moving to loosen up the military aid ban, the CIA and other U.S. intelligence agencies were confirming new Guatemalan government massacres.

In April 1981, a secret CIA cable described a massacre at Cocob, near Nebaj in the Ixil Indian territory. On April 17, 1981, government troops attacked the area believed to support leftist guerrillas, the cable said.

According to a CIA source, "the social population appeared to fully support the guerrillas" and "the soldiers were forced to fire at anything that moved." The CIA cable added that "the Guatemalan authorities admitted that 'many civilians' were killed in Cocob, many of whom undoubtedly were non-combatants."

Despite the CIA account and other similar reports, Reagan permitted Guatemala's army to buy \$3.2 million in military trucks and jeeps in June 1981. To permit the sale, Reagan removed the vehicles from a list of military equipment that was covered by the human rights embargo.

No Regrets

Apparently confident of Reagan's sympathies, the Guatemalan government continued its political repression without apology.

According to a State Department cable on Oct. 5, 1981, Guatemalan leaders met with Reagan's roving ambassador, retired Gen. Vernon Walters, and left no doubt about their plans. Guatemala's military leader, Gen. Fernando Romeo Lucas Garcia, "made clear that his government will continue as before that the repression will continue."

Human rights groups saw the same picture. The Inter-American Human Rights Commission released a report on Oct. 15, 1981, blaming the Guatemalan government for "thousands of illegal executions." [Washington Post, Oct. 16, 1981]

But the Reagan administration was set on whitewashing the ugly scene. A State Department "white paper," released in December 1981, blamed the violence on leftist "extremist groups" and their "terrorist methods," inspired and supported by Cuba's Fidel Castro.

Yet, even as these rationalizations were pitched to the American people, U.S. intelligence agencies in Guatemala continued to learn of government-sponsored massacres.

One CIA report in February 1982 described an army sweep through the so-called Ixil Triangle in central El Quiche province.

"The commanding officers of the units involved have been instructed to destroy

all towns and villages which are cooperating with the Guerrilla Army of the Poor [known as the EGP] and eliminate all sources of resistance," the report stated. "Since the operation began, several villages have been burned to the ground, and a large number of guerrillas and collaborators have been killed."

The CIA report explained the army's modus operandi: "When an army patrol meets resistance and takes fire from a town or village, it is assumed that the entire town is hostile and it is subsequently destroyed."

When the army encountered an empty village, it was "assumed to have been supporting the EGP, and it is destroyed. There are hundreds, possibly thousands of refugees in the hills with no homes to return to.

"The well-documented belief by the army that the entire Ixil Indian population is pro-EGP has created a situation in which the army can be expected to give no quarter to combatants and non-combatants alike."

Rios Montt

In March 1982, Gen. Efraim Rios Montt seized power in a coup d'etat. An avowed fundamentalist Christian, he immediately impressed Official Washington, where Reagan hailed Rios Montt as "a man of great personal integrity."

By July 1982, however, Rios Montt had begun a new scorched-earth campaign called his "rifles and beans" policy. The slogan meant that pacified Indians would get "beans," while all others could expect to be the target of army "rifles."

In October 1982, Rios Montt secretly gave *carte blanche* to the feared "Archivos" intelligence unit to expand "death squad" operations, internal U.S. government cables revealed.

Despite the widespread evidence of Guatemalan government atrocities cited in the internal U.S. government cables, political operatives for the Reagan administration sought to conceal the crimes. On Oct. 22, 1982, for instance, the U.S. Embassy claimed the Guatemalan government was the victim of a communist-inspired "disinformation campaign."

Reagan personally took that position in December 1982 when he met with Rios Montt and claimed that his regime was getting a "bum rap" on human rights.

On Jan. 7, 1983, Reagan lifted the ban on military aid to Guatemala and authorized the sale of \$6 million in military hardware. Approval covered spare parts for UH-1H helicopters and A-37 aircraft used in counterinsurgency operations.

State Department spokesman John Hughes said the sales were justified because

political violence in the cities had “declined dramatically” and that rural conditions had improved too.

In February 1983, however, a secret CIA cable noted a rise in “suspect right-wing violence” with kidnappings of students and teachers. Bodies of victims were appearing in ditches and gullies.

CIA sources traced these political murders to Rios Montt’s order to the “Archivos” in October to “apprehend, hold, interrogate and dispose of suspected guerrillas as they saw fit.”

Sugarcoating

Despite these grisly facts on the ground, the annual State Department human rights survey sugarcoated the facts for the American public and praised the supposedly improved human rights situation in Guatemala.

“The overall conduct of the armed forces had improved by late in the year” 1982, the report stated.

A different picture far closer to the secret information held by the U.S. government was coming from independent human rights investigators. On March 17, 1983, Americas Watch representatives condemned the Guatemalan army for human rights atrocities against the Indian population.

New York attorney Stephen L. Kass said these findings included proof that the government carried out “virtually indiscriminate murder of men, women and children of any farm regarded by the army as possibly supportive of guerrilla insurgents.”

Rural women suspected of guerrilla sympathies were raped before execution, Kass said. Children were “thrown into burning homes. They are thrown in the air and speared with bayonets. We heard many, many stories of children being picked up by the ankles and swung against poles so their heads are destroyed.” [AP, March 17, 1983]

Publicly, however, senior Reagan officials continued to put on a happy face.

On June 12, 1983, special envoy Richard B. Stone praised “positive changes” in Rios Montt’s government. But Rios Montt’s vengeful Christian fundamentalism was hurtling out of control, even by Guatemalan standards. In August 1983, Gen. Oscar Mejia Victores seized power in another coup.

Despite the power shift, Guatemalan security forces continued to kill those who were deemed subversives or terrorists.

When three Guatemalans working for the U.S. Agency for International Development were slain in November 1983, U.S. Ambassador Frederic Chapin suspected that "Archivos" hit squads were sending a message to the United States to back off even the mild pressure for human rights improvements.

In late November 1983, in a brief show of displeasure, the administration postponed the sale of \$2 million in helicopter spare parts. The next month, however, Reagan sent the spare parts anyway. In 1984, Reagan succeeded, too, in pressuring Congress to approve \$300,000 in military training for the Guatemalan army.

By mid-1984, Chapin, who had grown bitter about the army's stubborn brutality, was gone, replaced by a far-right political appointee named Alberto Piedra, who was all for increased military assistance to Guatemala.

In January 1985, Americas Watch issued a report observing that Reagan's State Department "is apparently more concerned with improving Guatemala's image than in improving its human rights."

Death Camp

Other examples of Guatemala's "death squad" strategy came to light later. For example, a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency cable in 1994 reported that the Guatemalan military had used an air base in Retalhuleu during the mid-1980s as a center for coordinating the counterinsurgency campaign in southwest Guatemala and for torturing and burying prisoners.

At the base, pits were filled with water to hold captured suspects. "Reportedly there were cages over the pits and the water level was such that the individuals held within them were forced to hold on to the bars in order to keep their heads above water and avoid drowning," the DIA report stated.

The Guatemalan military used the Pacific Ocean as another dumping spot for political victims, according to the DIA report.

Bodies of insurgents tortured to death and live prisoners marked for "disappearance" were loaded onto planes that flew out over the ocean where the soldiers would shove the victims into the water to drown, a tactic that had been a favorite disposal technique of the Argentine military in the 1970s.

The history of the Retalhuleu death camp was uncovered by accident in the early 1990s when a Guatemalan officer wanted to let soldiers cultivate their own vegetables on a corner of the base. But the officer was taken aside and told to drop the request "because the locations he had wanted to cultivate were burial sites that had been used by the D-2 [military intelligence] during the mid-

eighties," the DIA report said.

Guatemala, of course, was not the only Central American country where Reagan and his administration supported brutal counterinsurgency operations and then sought to cover up the bloody facts.

Deception of the American public a strategy that the administration internally called "perception management" was as much a part of the Central American story as the Bush administration's lies and distortions about weapons of mass destruction were to the lead-up to the war in Iraq.

Reagan's falsification of the historical record became a hallmark of the conflicts in El Salvador and Nicaragua as well as Guatemala. In one case, Reagan personally lashed out at a human rights investigator named Reed Brody, a New York lawyer who had collected affidavits from more than 100 witnesses to atrocities carried out by the U.S.-supported Contras in Nicaragua.

Angered by the revelations about his Contra "freedom-fighters," Reagan denounced Brody in a speech on April 15, 1985, calling him "one of dictator [Daniel] Ortega's supporters, a sympathizer who has openly embraced Sandinismo."

Privately, Reagan had a far more accurate understanding of the true nature of the Contras. At one point in the Contra war, Reagan turned to CIA official Duane Clarridge and demanded that the Contras be used to destroy some Soviet-supplied helicopters that had arrived in Nicaragua.

Clarridge recalled that "President Reagan pulled me aside and asked, 'Dewey, can't you get those vandals of yours to do this job.'" [See Clarridge's *A Spy for All Seasons*.]

Genocide Alleged

On Feb. 25, 1999, a Guatemalan truth commission issued a report on the staggering human rights crimes that Reagan and his administration had aided, abetted and concealed. The Historical Clarification Commission, an independent human rights body, estimated that the Guatemalan conflict claimed the lives of some 200,000 people with the most savage bloodletting occurring in the 1980s.

Based on a review of about 20 percent of the dead, the panel blamed the army for 93 percent of the killings and leftist guerrillas for three percent. Four percent were listed as unresolved.

The report documented that in the 1980s, the army committed 626 massacres against Mayan villages. "The massacres that eliminated entire Mayan villages are neither perfidious allegations nor figments of the imagination, but an authentic

chapter in Guatemala's history," the commission concluded.

The army "completely exterminated Mayan communities, destroyed their livestock and crops," the report said. In the northern highlands, the report termed the slaughter "genocide."

Besides carrying out murder and "disappearances," the army routinely engaged in torture and rape. "The rape of women, during torture or before being murdered, was a common practice" by the military and paramilitary forces, the report found.

The report added that the "government of the United States, through various agencies including the CIA, provided direct and indirect support for some [of these] state operations." The report concluded that the U.S. government also gave money and training to a Guatemalan military that committed "acts of genocide" against the Mayans.

"Believing that the ends justified everything, the military and the state security forces blindly pursued the anticommunist struggle, without respect for any legal principles or the most elemental ethical and religious values, and in this way, completely lost any semblance of human morals," said the commission chairman, Christian Tomuschat, a German jurist.

"Within the framework of the counterinsurgency operations carried out between 1981 and 1983, in certain regions of the country agents of the Guatemalan state committed acts of genocide against groups of the Mayan people," Tomuschat said.

Admitting a 'Mistake'

During a visit to Central America, on March 10, 1999, President Bill Clinton apologized for the past U.S. support of right-wing regimes in Guatemala.

"For the United States, it is important that I state clearly that support for military forces and intelligence units which engaged in violence and widespread repression was wrong, and the United States must not repeat that mistake," Clinton said.

Though Clinton did admit that U.S. policy in Guatemala was "wrong" – and the evidence of a U.S.-backed "genocide" might have been considered startling – the news was treated mostly as a one-day story in the U.S. press.

By the late 1990s, Ronald Reagan had been transformed into a national icon, with the Republican-controlled Congress attaching his name to public buildings around the country and to National Airport in Washington.

Democrats mostly approached this deification of Reagan as harmless, an easy

concession to the Republicans in the name of bipartisanship. Some Democrats would even try to cite Reagan as supportive of some of their positions as a way to protect themselves from attacks launched by the increasingly powerful right-wing news media.

The Democratic goal of looking to the future, not the past, had negative consequences, however. With Reagan and his brutal policies put beyond serious criticism, the path was left open for President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney to return to the “dark side” after the 9/11 attacks, authorizing torture and extra-judicial killings.

Now, President Obama is reprising toward Bush and Cheney the conflict-avoidance strategy that President Clinton took toward Reagan, looking forward as much as possible and backward as little as can be justified.

In 2009, the Democratic-controlled Congress passed – and Obama signed at a special White House ceremony with Nancy Reagan – a resolution to create a commission to plan a centennial celebration in 2011 of Ronald Reagan’s birth.

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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

Wretched US Journalism on Ukraine

Exclusive: The U.S. news media has failed the American people often in recent years by not challenging U.S. government falsehoods, as with Iraq’s WMD. But the most dangerous violation of journalistic principles has occurred in the Ukraine crisis, which has the potential of a nuclear war, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A basic rule of journalism is that there are almost always two sides to a story and that journalists should try to reflect that reality, a principle that is especially important when lives are at stake amid war fevers. Yet, American journalism has failed miserably in this regard during the Ukraine crisis.

With very few exceptions, the mainstream U.S. media has simply regurgitated the

propaganda from the U.S. State Department and other entities favoring western Ukrainians. There has been little effort to view the worsening crisis through the eyes of ethnic Russian Ukrainians living in the east or the Russians witnessing a political and humanitarian crisis on their border.



Frankly, I cannot recall any previous situation in which the U.S. media has been more biased across the board than on Ukraine. Not even the “group think” around Iraq’s non-existent WMDs was as single-minded as this, with the U.S. media perspective on Ukraine almost always from the point of view of the western Ukrainians who led the overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovich, whose political base was in the east.

So, what might appear to an objective observer as a civil war between western Ukrainians, including the neo-Nazis who spearheaded last year’s coup against Yanukovich, and eastern Ukrainians, who refused to accept the anti-Yanukovich order that followed the coup, has been transformed by the U.S. news media into a confrontation between the forces of good (the western Ukrainians) and the forces of evil (the eastern Ukrainians) with an overlay of “Russian aggression” as Russian President Vladimir Putin is depicted as a new Hitler.

Though the horrific bloodshed more than 5,000 dead has been inflicted overwhelmingly on the ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine by the forces from western Ukraine, the killing is routinely blamed on either the eastern Ukrainian rebels or Putin for allegedly fomenting the trouble in the first place (though there is no evidence that he did, as even former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has acknowledged.)

I realize that anyone who doesn’t accept the Official Washington “group think” on Ukraine is denounced as a “Putin apologist” just as anyone who questioned the conventional wisdom about Saddam Hussein giving his WMDs to al-Qaeda was a “Saddam apologist” but step back for a minute and look at the crisis through the eyes of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

A year ago, they saw what looked to them like a U.S.-organized coup, relying on both propaganda and violence to overthrow their constitutionally elected government. They also detected a strong anti-ethnic-Russian bias in the new regime with its efforts to strip away Russian as an official language. And they witnessed brutal killings of ethnic Russians at the hands of neo-Nazis in Odessa and elsewhere.

Their economic interests, too, were threatened since they worked at companies that did substantial business with Russia. If those historic ties to Russia were cut in favor of special economic relations with the European Union, the eastern Ukrainians would be among the worst losers.

Remember, that before backing away from the proposed association agreement with the EU in November 2013, Yanukovich received a report from economic experts in Kiev that Ukraine stood to lose \$160 billion if it broke with Russia, as Der Spiegel reported. Much of that economic pain would have fallen on eastern Ukraine.

Economic Worries

On the rare occasions when American journalists have actually talked with eastern Ukrainians, this fear of the economic consequences has been a core concern, along with worries about the harsh austerity plan that the International Monetary Fund prescribed as a prerequisite for access to Western loans.

For instance, in April 2014, Washington Post correspondent Anthony Faiola reported from Donetsk that many of the eastern Ukrainians whom he interviewed said their resistance to the new Kiev regime was driven by fear over “economic hardship” and the IMF austerity plan that will make their lives even harder.

“At a most dangerous and delicate time, just as it battles Moscow for hearts and minds across the east, the pro-Western government is set to initiate a shock therapy of economic measures to meet the demands of an emergency bailout from the International Monetary Fund,” Faiola reported.

In other words, Faiola encountered reasonable concerns among eastern Ukrainians about what was happening in Kiev. Many eastern Ukrainians felt disenfranchised by the overthrow of their elected leader and they worried about their future in a U.S.-dominated Ukraine. You can disagree with their point of view but it is an understandable perspective.

When some eastern Ukrainians mounted protests and occupied buildings similar to what the western Ukrainians had done in Kiev before the coup these protesters were denounced by the coup regime as “terrorists” and became the target of a

punitive military campaign involving some of the same neo-Nazi militias that spearheaded the Feb. 22 coup against Yanukovich.

Nearly all the 5,000 or more people who have died in the civil war have been killed in eastern Ukraine with ethnic Russian civilians bearing the brunt of those fatalities, many killed by artillery barrages from the Ukrainian army firing into populated centers and using cluster-bomb munitions.

Even Human Rights Watch, which is largely financed by pro-coup billionaire George Soros, reported that “Ukrainian government forces used cluster munitions in populated areas in Donetsk city” despite the fact that “the use of cluster munitions in populated areas violates the laws of war due to the indiscriminate nature of the weapon and may amount to war crimes.”

Neo-Nazi and other “volunteer” brigades, dispatched by the Kiev regime, have also engaged in human rights violations, including death squad operations pulling people from their homes and executing them. Amnesty International, another human rights group that Soros helps fund and that has generally promoted Western interests in Eastern Europe, issued a report noting abuses committed by the pro-Kiev Aidar militia.

“Members of the Aidar territorial defence battalion, operating in the north Luhansk region, have been involved in widespread abuses, including abductions, unlawful detention, ill-treatment, theft, extortion, and possible executions,” the Amnesty International report said.

The Aidar battalion commander told an Amnesty International researcher: “There is a war here. The law has changed, procedures have been simplified. If I choose to, I can have you arrested right now, put a bag over your head and lock you up in a cellar for 30 days on suspicion of aiding separatists.”

Amnesty International wrote: “Some of the abuses committed by members of the Aidar battalion amount to war crimes, for which both the perpetrators and, possibly, the commanders would bear responsibility under national and international law.”

Neo-Nazi Battalions

And the Aidar battalion is not even the worst of the so-called “volunteer” brigades. Others carry Nazi banners and espouse racist contempt for the ethnic Russians who have become the target of something close to “ethnic cleansing” in the areas under control of the Kiev regime. Many eastern Ukrainians fear falling into the hands of these militia members who have been witnessed leading captives to open graves and executing them.

As the conservative London Telegraph described in [an article](#) last August by correspondent Tom Parfitt: “Kiev’s use of volunteer paramilitaries to stamp out the Russian-backed Donetsk and Luhansk ‘people’s republics’ should send a shiver down Europe’s spine.

“Recently formed battalions such as Donbas, Dnipro and Azov, with several thousand men under their command, are officially under the control of the interior ministry but their financing is murky, their training inadequate and their ideology often alarming. The Azov men use the neo-Nazi Wolfsangel (Wolf’s Hook) symbol on their banner and members of the battalion are openly white supremacists, or anti-Semites.”

Based on interviews with militia members, the Telegraph reported that some of the fighters doubted the Holocaust, expressed admiration for Adolf Hitler and acknowledged that they are indeed Nazis.

Andriy Biletsky, the Azov commander, “is also head of an extremist Ukrainian group called the Social National Assembly,” according to the Telegraph article which quoted a commentary by Biletsky as declaring: “The historic mission of our nation in this critical moment is to lead the White Races of the world in a final crusade for their survival. A crusade against the Semite-led Untermenschen.”

The Telegraph questioned Ukrainian authorities in Kiev who acknowledged that they were aware of the extremist ideologies of some militias but insisted that the higher priority was having troops who were strongly motivated to fight. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“Ignoring Ukraine’s Neo-Nazi Storm Troopers.”](#)]

So, the current wave of U.S. propaganda condemning a rebel offensive for violating a shaky cease-fire might look different if seen through the eyes of a population under siege, being cut off from banking services, left to starve and facing “death squad” purges by out-of-control neo-Nazis.

Through those eyes, it would make sense to reclaim territory currently occupied by the Kiev forces, to protect fellow ethnic Russians from depredations, and to establish borders for what you might hope to make into a sustainable autonomous zone.

And, if you put yourself in the Russian position, you might feel empathy for people who were your fellow citizens less than a quarter century ago and who saw their elected leader ousted in a U.S.-backed coup. You also might be alarmed at the presence of Nazi storm troopers (considering the history of Hitler’s invasion) and the prospects of NATO moving up to your border with a possible deployment of nuclear weapons. You might even recall how agitated Americans got

over nuclear missiles in Cuba.

Granted, some of these Russian fears may be overwrought, but the Kremlin has to worry about threats to Russia's national security just like any other country does. If you were in Putin's shoes, what would you do? Would you turn your back on the plight of the eastern Ukrainians? Would you let a hostile military alliance push up against your borders with a potential nuclear threat, especially given the extra-legal means used to remove Ukraine's constitutionally elected president?

Even if the U.S. press corps fulfilled its obligation to tell both sides of the story, many Americans would still condemn Putin's acceptance of Crimea's pleas for reentry into Russia and his assistance to the embattled eastern Ukrainians. They would accept the U.S. government's relentless presentation of the Ukraine crisis as "Russian aggression."

And, they might still buy the story that we're endlessly sold about the Ukraine crisis being a premeditated move by Putin in a Hitlerian strategy to conquer the Baltic States. Even though there's zero evidence that Putin ever had that in mind, some Americans might still choose to believe it.

But my point is that American journalists should not be U.S. government propagandists. Their job is not to herd the American people into some "group think" corral. A good journalist would want to present the positions of both sides with some evenhandedness.

Yet, that is not what we have witnessed from the U.S. news media on the Ukraine crisis. It has been nearly all propaganda nearly all of the time. That is not only a disservice to the American people and to the democratic precept about an informed electorate. It is a reckless violation of professional principles that has helped lurch the world toward a potential nuclear conflagration.

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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry's trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

WPost Is Lost in Neocon Fantasyland

The neocons now control the editorial pages of the New York Times and the Washington Post, a dangerous development for the American people and the world. Yet, the Post remains the more extreme of the two, pushing for endless confrontations and wars, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar describes.

By Paul R. Pillar

James Carden and Jacob Heilbrunn provided in the current issue of *The National Interest* an extensively documented review of how the ever-more-neocon editorial page of the *Washington Post* “responds to dangerous and complex problems with simplistic prescriptions.”

The *Post*'s most recent editorial about the nuclear negotiations with Iran is firmly in that same simplistic, destructive tradition. It is hard to know where to begin in pointing out the deficiencies in this effort by the *Post*'s editorialists, but noting some of them can illustrate how the tendencies that Carden and Heilbrunn cataloged constitute, as the abstract for their article puts it, a crusade for doctrines “that have brought Washington to grief in the past.”

The current editorial offers a prescription that is so simplistic that it isn't really a prescription at all. And that, the absence of any plausible proposed alternative, is its most basic shortcoming. Instead it is just a collection of ways of saying, “We don't like where these negotiations are going.”

Even though the writers claim that “we have long supported negotiations with Iran,” the effect of their piece is to add to the negative background music to which those determined to defeat and derail *any* agreement with Iran, including Benjamin Netanyahu and confirmed deal-saboteurs in the U.S. Congress, dance and from which they derive energy.

The editorial posits as one of its complaints a version of the familiar meme about the U.S. administration supposedly conceding too much to Iran, even though that image is quite at odds with the actual history of these negotiations, in which it is Iran that has made the most significant concessions.

The editorial says the Obama administration supposedly “once aimed to eliminate Iran's ability to enrich uranium,” although there is little indication that this administration ever believed that a zero-enrichment formula could ever be the basis of an achievable agreement.

It is interesting to note, however, that more than a decade ago a different

administration, evidently thinking a demand for zero enrichment was the proper policy, spurned an opportunity to negotiate an agreement with Tehran when Iran had only a tiny fraction of the enrichment centrifuges it does now, and we all know how that policy worked out.

On the subject of uranium enrichment the editorial writers play familiar and hazardous semantic games in positing a goal of “eliminating Iran’s potential to produce nuclear weapons” and “denying Iran the capability to develop a military nuclear option.” It is impossible to “eliminate” such a “potential,” and Iran already has, after all those years of no negotiations, the “capability” to develop such an “option.”

This kind of talk only helps the deal-saboteurs lay a trap by being able to say about any conceivable agreement that could emerge from any negotiations with Iran that it does not “eliminate” capabilities or potential or options.

The purpose of an agreement is to ensure that Iran does not exercise such an option. The most important element in providing this assurance is the unprecedented level of intrusive inspections that would make any move toward exercising such options immediately clear. The *Post* editorial pooh-poohs this by referring to “theoretically giving the world time to respond.” No, it’s not just theoretically; the inspection arrangements would *actually* given the world plenty of time to respond.

The *Post* also bemoans how “even limited restrictions would remain in force for only a specified number of years.” Most observers of the negotiations expect that the time spans involved, and especially for enhanced inspections, would be many years, and perhaps a decade or more.

The editorial gives no reason to suspect that the Iranians after all this time would have any motivation at all to discard everything they had gained from remaining a certified, inspected, restricted, non-nuclear weapon state. Nor does the editorial comment on what it would mean for the conclusions we ought to draw about Iran’s motivations and intentions if it demonstrated for several years its willingness to comply with an agreement that would be quite restrictive on Iran.

This gets to the issue of possible cheating or stealthy acquisition of a nuclear weapon. The editorial throws that up as another thing to get us worried. But it says nothing at all about why the possibility of stealthy building of a bomb would be any greater with a negotiated agreement than without one. It wouldn’t, and if anything probably would be less, given the enhanced inspections under an agreement.

A second line of attack in the editorial is another recently much-used meme by opponents: the notion of “increasingly aggressive efforts by Iran to extend its influence across the Middle East.” In this respect the editorial exhibits one of the same basic deficiencies that is almost always exhibited when the notion is used this way: it says nothing about why, if such Iranian regional activity is a problem, it would be any worse under a nuclear agreement than without one.

If such activity really is as much of a problem as the editorial suggests, then the years-long keep-Iran-in-the-penalty box approach hasn't worked very well, has it? The editorialists write that “rather than contest the Iranian bid for regional hegemony, as has every previous U.S. administration since the 1970s [again if that's the case, how well has that approach worked out?], Mr. Obama appears ready to concede Iran a place in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and beyond...”

It is not up to the United States, or in the power of the United States, to “concede” such things; Iran is in the region, and will have relations with other states in the region, and along with other states will compete for influence in the region, whether we like it or not. Is Iran, by negotiating with us, “conceding” a place to the United States in Iraq, Syria, or elsewhere?

On the “regional aggression” theme the editorial also exhibits most of the other misconceptions that are exhibited when this theme comes up, such as the idea that everywhere there is any turmoil involving anyone with any link to Iran, that the turmoil is the result of Iranian expansionist initiatives, when in fact it is not. Or the idea that Tehran is operating a Comintern-like Shia international, when in fact it is not.

An additional twist that the *Post* gives to the theme is to state that “the White House has avoided actions Iran might perceive as hostile, such as supporting military action against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad.”

Getting more deeply involved in the Syrian civil war is, of course, something the *Post* editorial board has been calling for repeatedly over the last couple of years. Amid all that war-drum-beating, it apparently doesn't occur to the board that the administration has very good reasons not to sink the United States into that tar pit, regardless of whether or not Iran would see such action as hostile.

The editorial calls for more Congressional involvement, another open invitation for more deal-killing activity by saboteurs on Capitol Hill. Although the editorial accurately quotes Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken about how the administration sees Congressional action as appropriate only later after Iran has demonstrated that it is living up to its end of a deal, it makes no mention of the logic behind that schedule.

The logic ought to be appealing to anyone as distrustful of Iran as the editorial writers evidently are. The administration intends to limit any sanctions relief in the early phase of an agreement to executive action so that sanctions could be quickly reinstated in the event of any Iranian failure to observe the terms of the agreement, more quickly and easily than if new legislation had to be enacted.

The editorial near its end makes it sound as if there is some alternative that it is recommending by referring to how “the right response to the questions now being raised is to seek better terms from Iran...” Oh? How, exactly? Isn't such seeking what the negotiators have been doing for months?

This sort of suggestion might be a disguised way of giving more momentum to sanctions legislation that is rationalized as strengthening the U.S. negotiating position but in fact is designed to kill the negotiations.

Or the suggestion may reflect naiveté that is somewhat akin to the *Post* editorial board living in what Carden and Heilbrunn describe as “a foreign-policy fairy-tale land in which nasty authoritarian regimes can be magically transformed by American leadership into democratic ones.” In the same fairy-tale land, American leadership and toughness can magically get other governments to accept terms that are contrary to their interests.

The last few words of the editorial correctly raise what ought to be the key question in any evaluation of an agreement that emerges from these negotiations, which is to consider whether it “is better than the alternatives.” Except the editorialists don't examine what the alternatives really are.

Indefinite continuation of the interim agreement currently in force would be helpful in fulfilling U.S. nonproliferation objectives, but the Iranians would be unlikely to accept being strung out like that, given that they are still under the economically damaging oil and financial sanctions. Besides, hardliners in the U.S. Congress have made it clear they would push hard for agreement-violating, deal-killing additional sanctions if there is no final accord by early summer.

So the true alternative is no agreement at all, and that means no special restrictions on, and no intrusive inspections of, the Iranian nuclear program. Yes, let's indeed compare whatever agreement is reached with the alternative.

We should remember the grief that the crusading doctrines the *Post* has supported have brought us in the past. In particular we might recall the *Post's* support for the Iraq War, which among much other grief it caused the United States also was the single biggest cause in recent years of the expansion of Iranian

influence in the Middle East, specifically, in Iraq itself.

Then we might ask where else in the *Post's* fairy-tale land its current undermining of the Iran negotiations is likely to lead us.

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When Silencing Dissent Isn't News

Exclusive: The criminal case against ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern for “resisting arrest” when he was denied entry to a public speech by retired Gen. David Petraeus appears to be nearly over, but the image of police brutally shielding the mighty from a citizen's question remains troubling, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

What if Martin Luther King Jr. had been arrested in Birmingham, Alabama, in April 1963 and the U.S. news media had decided that it wasn't a story, just some troublemaker getting what he deserved for breaking the law? Would King have gone on to give his “I have a dream speech” in August, win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 and change American history?

Some Americans would insist that suppressing news about King's arrest during the Birmingham protests simply couldn't happen here because we have a free press that for all its faults knows a good story when it sees one.

Sure, these people might acknowledge that there may have been a time before airplanes and television when significant events in fairly remote parts of the country were missed because they were harder to get to or because editors might not even have been aware of a newsworthy story, but not in 1963 and surely not today, in the Internet age when there's Facebook and Twitter, which news organizations monitor regularly.

So, what if I told you that an internationally known American a 75-year-old Army veteran and a longtime official at the Central Intelligence Agency, someone who had famously questioned the imperious Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld about his Iraq War lies in a public event that led evening newscasts in 2006 was recently denied entry to a public speech by another Iraq War icon, Gen. David

Petraeus, and despite having paid for a ticket was brutally arrested by the police and jailed?

Wouldn't that be a story? Wouldn't that be something that the news media, especially the "liberal" news media, should jump all over? Wouldn't a newspaper like the New York Times just love something like that?

But what if I told you that the New York Times wasn't interested at all? You might think that perhaps the event occurred in some distant hamlet, maybe a small college town where there wasn't much media, so it just fell through the cracks.

Yet, this story actually played out in New York City, the media capital of the world, on the Upper East Side at the 92nd Street Y in full view of hundreds of New Yorkers on the night of Oct. 30, 2014. Former CIA analyst Ray McGovern was roughly arrested, with the police ignoring his howls of pain as they pulled his arms behind his back. (McGovern had recently suffered a painful shoulder injury from a fall.)

The arrest of McGovern on charges of resisting arrest, criminal trespass and disorderly conduct did draw attention from people on Facebook and Twitter. It was described in some detail at reasonably well-read Internet sites, including Consortiumnews.com. The story resonated around the world, even reaching RT, the Moscow-based network.

Yet, it was studiously ignored by nearly all the New York media. When I ran a Google search for "Ray McGovern, Petraeus, arrest," there were scores of articles from various Web sites but next to nothing from the mainstream media. Only one brief item came up from the New York Daily News with a misleading headline saying McGovern was "trying to crash" the Petraeus speech (although the article did note that McGovern had bought a \$45 ticket).

McGovern, who has become a prominent critic of recent U.S. war policies (and who writes frequently for Consortiumnews.com), called me the day before the event and said he planned to attend Petraeus's speech with hopes that he might be able to ask a question from the audience, like he had in challenging Rumsfeld.

But someone in authority apparently got wind of McGovern's plan he still is curious how that happened and he was intercepted when he arrived at the 92nd Street Y. A security guard addressed him by name, "Ray, you're not welcome here" and the NYPD was prepositioned to arrest him.

As the police pinned his arms behind him wrenching his injured shoulder McGovern screamed in pain as bystanders unsuccessfully implored the police not to behave so brutally. The arrest was captured on an amateur video (uploaded to YouTube by

April Watters). It is not pleasant to watch.

Probably some Americans feel that McGovern got what he deserved for even thinking about posing a pointed question to a “hero” like retired Gen. Petraeus, who was speaking along with one of his neocon friends, Council on Foreign Affairs honcho Max Boot, who, like Petraeus, had been all gung-ho for the Iraq War.

Having briefed senior U.S. government officials for years while at the CIA, McGovern is not intimidated by some growling response from a powerful man. Nor is he scared of getting booed by an audience enthralled to a famous speaker.

So, in that sense, McGovern might well have “disrupted” the event with an impertinent question, possibly about how the Iraqi Army that Petraeus has boasted about training so well collapsed in the face of ragtag militants from the Islamic State in 2014.

That might have caused an uncomfortable moment or two, but isn’t that what democracy and freedom of speech are all about, the ability for a citizen to question the mighty? And, really, is it the job of police in a “free society” to roughly arrest a citizen who objects to being denied entry to a public event because of his perceived political opinions – and to prevent the citizen from having the chance to ask a question?

Though he lives in Arlington, Virginia, McGovern had to return to New York for a court appearance on Feb. 4. There, the judge granted what’s called an “adjournment in contemplation of dismissal,” meaning that the charges will go away if McGovern doesn’t commit any new offenses. Advised by his pro bono attorney, Moira Meltzer-Cohen, McGovern accepted the offer, rather than extend the legal fight over what appeared to be a First Amendment issue.

But perhaps what should alarm Americans the most is that the New York Times and other major media in New York City see nothing newsworthy about a citizen being silenced, roughed up and arrested for simply hoping to ask the esteemed David Petraeus a question.

[For more on this topic, see Consortiumnews.com’s “[Petraeus Spared Ray McGovern’s Question](#)”, “[Stifling Dissent on the Upper East Side](#),” and McGovern’s “[A Pointed Letter to Gen. Petraeus](#).”]

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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The

trilogy includes *America's Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

A Rush to Judgment in Argentine Bomb Case?

The mysterious death of an Argentine prosecutor has whipped up new suspicions around the case of who bombed the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) in 1994 and whether there was an official cover-up, but the evidence on both counts remains dubious or discredited, says Gareth Porter.

By Gareth Porter

The evidence already available about Argentine Prosecutor Alberto Nisman's death from a gunshot to the head creates a strong presumption that he was murdered. He was about to present publicly his accusation that President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and her foreign minister, Hector Timerman, conspired to absolve Iran of the 1994 AMIA bombing and lift the Interpol red notices on the accused Iranians.

And it was Nisman's 2006 request for the arrest of six former senior Iranian officials for the bombing that prompted his push for those red notices. In the context of Argentine political culture, with its long experience of impunity for crimes committed by the powerful, the circumstances of his death have led to a general conviction that the government must have been behind his murder.

But there is good reason to be cautious about that assumption. Nisman's case against Kirchner was problematic. The central accusation in his affidavit, made 96 times, according to press accounts, was that Kirchner and Timerman had sought to revoke the Interpol arrest warrants against the former Iranian officials.

But Ronald K. Noble, the secretary general of Interpol for 15 years until last November, [denied Nisman's accusation](#). Noble declared, "I can say with 100 percent certainty, not a scintilla of doubt, that Foreign Minister Timerman and the Argentine government have been steadfast, persistent and unwavering that the Interpol's red notices be issued, remain in effect and not be suspended or removed."

Noble's denial raises an obvious question: Why would the Kirchner government, knowing that Nisman's main claim could be easily refuted, have any reason to kill him on the eve of the presentation of his case? Why give those seeking to

discredit the government's policy on the AMIA bombing the opportunity to shift the issue from the facts of the case to the presumption of officially sponsored assassination?

The Kirchner-Timerman negotiation of an agreement with Iran in January 2013 for an "international truth commission" on the AMIA bombing would have sent five respected international judicial figures to Iran to question the accused Iranians. That was a way of getting around the Iranian refusal to subject former high-ranking officials to Argentine justice. But Nisman was trying to prove that was an illicit cover-up for a cynical deal with Iran. He considered it "a betrayal of the country and his work," according to his friend, Gustavo Perednik.

Nisman's "criminal complaint" against Kirchner and Timerman claimed the government's negotiations with Iran involved a "sophisticated criminal plan" to make a deal with one of the Iranians the prosecutor accused of the AMIA bombing, former cultural attaché Mohsen Rabbani. It asserted that Argentina promised Iran that it would lift the Interpol notices on the six Iranian in exchange for an "oil for grains" deal.

Nisman's accusation was based on snippets of transcripts from 5,000 hours of wiretaps of conversations of allies of Kirchner government that have now been made public by a judge. One of the excerpts quotes Rabbani himself, in a conversation with an ally of Fernandez, as saying: "Iran was Argentina's main buyer and now it's buying almost nothing. That could change. Here [in Iran] there are some sectors of the government who've told me they are willing to sell oil to Argentina and also to buy weapons."

The statement proves nothing, however, except that that Rabbani knew some Iranian officials who were interested in oil sales to Argentina. No evidence of Rabbani being involved in negotiating on behalf of Iran is suggested in the Nisman document, and the person at the other end of the line was not an Argentine official. So the conversation did not involve anyone who even had direct knowledge of the actual negotiations between the governments of Iran and Argentina.

The same thing applies to the other individuals who have been identified as speaking on the wiretaps in favor of such a deal. Those individuals are friendly with officials of the Kirchner government and friendly with Iran, but the actual negotiations were carried out by senior officials of the foreign ministries of Iran and Argentina, not by private individuals. The distinction between knowledge and hearsay is a fundamental principle in judicial processes for a very good reason.

The presentation of facts or allegations as proof of guilt, even though they proved nothing of the sort, was also a pattern that permeated Nisman's 2006 "Request for Arrests" in the 1994 AMIA bombing. Contrary to the general reverence in the news media for his indictment of senior Iranian officials for their alleged responsibility for the bombing, his case was built on a massive accumulation of highly dubious and misleading claims, from the "irrefutable evidence" of Rabbani's participation in planning to the identification of the alleged suicide car bomber.

This writer's investigation of the case over several months, which included interviews with U.S. diplomats who had served in the Embassy in Buenos Aires in the years following the AMIA bombing as well as with the FBI official detailed to work on the case in 1996-97, concluded that the Argentine investigators never found any evidence of Iranian involvement.

Nisman asserted that the highest Iranian officials had decided to carry out the bombing at a meeting on Aug. 12 or 14, 1993, primarily on the testimony of four officials of the Mujahedeen E-Khalq (MEK), the Iranian exile terrorist group that was openly dedicated to the overthrow of the Iranian regime. The four MEK officials claimed to know the precise place, date and time and the three-point agenda of the meeting.

When U.S. Ambassador Anthony Wayne, meeting with Nisman in November 2006, asked him about Argentine press reports that had criticized the document for using the testimony of "unreliable witnesses," Nisman responded, according to the Embassy reporting cable, that several of the witnesses were "former senior Iraqi [sic] officials, e.g. Bani Sadr, with direct knowledge of events surrounding the conception of the attacks."

Nisman's suggestion that former Iranian president Abolhassen Banisadr had "direct knowledge" related to the AMIA bombings was a stunningly brazen falsehood. Banisadr had been impeached by the Iranian legislature in June 1981 and had fled to Paris the following month 13 years before the bombing.

Nisman also cited the testimony of Abolghassem Mesbahi, who called himself a "defector" from the Iranian intelligence service, that Iranian officials had made such a decision sometime in August 1993. But Mesbahi was known by U.S. intelligence analysts as a "serial fabricator", who had also told an obviously false story about Iranian involvement in the 9/11 attacks.

Nisman failed to mention, moreover, that Mesbahi had given a secret 100-page deposition to Argentine investigators in 2000 in Mexico in which he had claimed the planning for the attack had begun in 1992.

Nisman's was so convinced of Iran's guilt that he was ready to see almost any fact as supporting evidence, even when there was an obvious reason for doubting its relevance. For example, he cited Rabbani's shopping for a van "similar to the one that exploded in front of the AMIA building a few months later."

In fact, however, as I reported in 2008, the Argentine investigation files include the original intelligence report on the surveillance of Rabbani showing that Rabbani's visit to the car dealer was not "a few months" before the bombing, but a full 15 months earlier.

Despite the Argentine intelligence following Rabbani's every move and tapping his telephones for all those months, Nisman cites nothing indicating that Rabbani did anything indicating his involvement in preparations for a terror bombing.

The FBI official who assisted the investigation told me in a November 2007 interview that the use of phone metadata to suggest that Rabbani was in touch with an "operational group" nothing but "speculation," and said that neither he nor officials in Washington had taken it seriously as evidence of Rabbani's involvement.

The fact that Nisman's two indictments related to Iran and AMIA were extremely tendentious obviously does not dispose of the question of who killed him. But whatever the reason for his being killed, it wasn't because he had revealed irrefutable truths about AMIA and Argentine government policy.

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Nuclear War and Clashing Ukraine Narratives

Exclusive: America and Russia have two nearly opposite narratives on Ukraine, which is more an indictment of the U.S. news media which feigns objectivity but disseminates what amounts to propaganda. These divergent narratives are driving the world toward a possible nuclear crisis, writes Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The U.S. government and mainstream media are swaggering toward a possible

nuclear confrontation with Russia over Ukraine without any of the seriousness that has informed this sort of decision-making throughout the nuclear age. Instead, Official Washington seems possessed by a self-righteous goofiness that could be the prelude to the end of life on this planet.

Nearly across the U.S. political spectrum, there is a pugnacious "group think" which has transformed what should have been a manageable political dispute in Ukraine into some morality play where U.S. politicians and pundits blather on about how the nearly year-old coup regime in Kiev "shares our values" and how America must be prepared to defend this regime militarily.

Though I'm told that President Barack Obama personally recognizes how foolhardy this attitude is, he has made no significant move to head off the craziness and, indeed, has tolerated provocative actions by his underlings, such as neocon Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland's scheming with coup plotters to overthrow Ukraine's elected President Viktor Yanukovich last February.

Obama also has withheld from the American people intelligence information that undercuts some of the more extreme claims that his administration has made. For instance, I'm told that he has detailed intelligence reporting on both the mysterious sniper attack that preceded the putsch nearly a year ago and the shoot-down of the Malaysia Airlines Flights 17 that deepened the crisis last summer. But he won't release the findings.

More broadly over the last year, Obama's behavior ranging from his initial neglect of the Ukraine issue, as Nuland's coup plotting unfolded, to his own participation in the tough talk, such as boasting during his State of the Union address that he had helped put the Russian economy "in tatters" ranks as one of the most irresponsible performances by a U.S. president.

Given the potential stakes of nuclear war, none of the post-World War II presidents behaved as recklessly as Obama has, which now includes allowing his administration officials to talk loosely about sending military support to an unstable regime in Kiev that includes neo-Nazis who have undertaken death-squad operations against ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

U.S. Gen. Philip Breedlove, who is commander of NATO, declared last November that regarding supplying military support for the Kiev government "nothing at this time is off the table." Breedlove is now pushing actively to send lethal U.S. military equipment to fend off an offensive by ethnic Russian rebels in the east.

I'm told that the Russians fear that U.S. officials are contemplating placing Cruise missiles in Ukraine or otherwise introducing advanced weaponry that

Moscow regards as a direct threat to its national security. Whether or not the Russians are being alarmist, these fears are affecting their own decision-making.

None of the nuclear-age presidents not Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton or even George W. Bush would have engaged in such provocative actions on Russia's borders, though some surely behaved aggressively in overthrowing governments and starting wars farther away.

Even Ronald Reagan, an aggressive Cold Warrior, kept his challenges to the Soviet Union in areas that were far less sensitive to its national security than Ukraine. He may have supported the slaughter of leftists in Central America and Africa or armed Islamic fundamentalists fighting a Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan, but he recognized the insanity of a military showdown with Moscow in Eastern Europe.

After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, U.S. presidents became more assertive, pushing NATO into the former Warsaw Pact nations and, under President Clinton, bombing a Russian ally in Serbia, but that came at a time when Russia was essentially flat on its back geopolitically.

Perhaps the triumphalism of that period is still alive especially among neocons who reject President Vladimir Putin's reassertion of Russia's national pride. These Washington hardliners still feel that they can treat Moscow with disdain, ignoring the fact that Russia maintains a formidable nuclear arsenal and is not willing to return to the supine position of the 1990s.

In 2008, President George W. Bush arguably one of the most reckless presidents of the era backed away from a confrontation with Russia when Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, a neocon favorite, drew the Russians into a border conflict over South Ossetia. Despite some war talk from the likes of Vice President Dick Cheney and Sen. John McCain, President Bush showed relative restraint.

Imbalanced Narrative

But Obama has failed to rein in his administration's war hawks and has done nothing to correct the biased narrative that his State Department has fed to the equally irresponsible mainstream U.S. news media. Since the Ukraine crisis began in fall of 2013, the New York Times and other major U.S. news outlets have provided only one side of the story, openly supporting the interests of the pro-European western Ukrainians over the ethnic Russian eastern Ukrainians.

The bias is so strong that the mainstream media has largely ignored the remarkable story of the Kiev regime willfully dispatching Nazi storm troopers to

kill ethnic Russians in the east, something that hasn't happened in Europe since World War II.

For Western news organizations that are quick to note the slightest uptick in neo-Nazism in Europe, there has been a willful blindness to Kiev's premeditated use of what amount to Nazi death squads undertaking house-to-house killings in eastern Ukraine. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Seeing No Neo-Nazi Militias in Ukraine.](#)"]

The Russian government has repeatedly protested these death-squad operations and other crimes committed by the Kiev regime, but the U.S. mainstream media is so in the tank for the western Ukrainians that it has suppressed this aspect of the crisis, typically burying references to the neo-Nazi militias at the end of stories or dismissing these accounts as "Russian propaganda."

With this ugly reality hidden from the U.S. public, Obama's State Department has been able to present a white-hat-vs.-black-hat narrative to the crisis. So, while Russians saw a constitutionally elected government on their border overthrown by a U.S.-backed coup last February and then human rights atrocities inflicted on ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine the American people heard only about wonderful pro-American "reformers" in Kiev and the evil pro-Russian "minions" trying to destroy "democracy" at Putin's bidding.

This distorted American narrative has represented one of the most unprofessional and dangerous performances in the history of modern U.S. journalism, rivaling the false conventional wisdom about Iraq's WMD except in this case the media propaganda is aimed at a country in Russia that really does have weapons of mass destruction.

The Russians also have noted the arrival of financially self-interested Americans, including Vice President Joe Biden's son Hunter Biden and Ukraine's new Finance Minister Natalie Jaresko, reminding the Russians of the American financial experts who descended on Moscow with their "shock therapy" in the 1990s, "reforms" that enriched a few well-connected oligarchs but impoverished millions of average Russians.

Jaresko, a former U.S. diplomat who took Ukrainian citizenship in December 2014 to become Finance Minister, had been in charge of a U.S.-taxpayer-financed \$150 million Ukrainian investment fund which involved substantial insider dealings, including paying a management firm that Jaresko created more than \$1 million a year in fees, even as the \$150 million apparently dwindled to less than \$100 million.

Jaresko also has been involved in a two-year-long legal battle with her ex-

husband to gag him from releasing information about apparent irregularities in the handling of the U.S. money. Jaresko went into Chancery Court in Delaware to enforce a non-disclosure clause against her ex-husband, Ihor Figlus, and got a court order to silence him.

This week, when I contacted George Pazuniak, Figlus's lawyer about Jaresko's aggressive enforcement of the non-disclosure agreement, he told me that "at this point, it's very difficult for me to say very much without having a detrimental effect on my client."

With Jaresko now being hailed as a Ukrainian "reformer" who in the words of New York Times' columnist Thomas L. Friedman "shares our values," one has to wonder why she has fought so hard to shut up her ex-husband regarding possible revelations about improper handling of U.S. taxpayer money. [See Consortiumnews.com's "Ukraine's Made-in-USA Finance Minister."]

More Interested Parties

The Russians also looked askance at the appointment of Estonian Jaanika Merilo as the latest foreigner to be brought inside the Ukrainian government as a "reformer." Merilo, a Jaresko associate, is being put in charge of attracting foreign investments but her photo spreads look more like someone interested in some rather kinky partying.

The Russians are aware, too, of prominent Americans circling around the potential plunder of Ukraine. For instance, Hunter Biden was named to the board of directors of Burisma Holdings, Ukraine's largest private gas firm. Burisma is also a shadowy Cyprus-based company linked to Privat Bank.

Privat Bank is controlled by the thuggish billionaire oligarch Ihor Kolomoysky, who was appointed by the Kiev regime to be governor of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, a south-central province of Ukraine. Kolomoysky has helped finance the paramilitary forces killing ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

And, Burisma has been lining up well-connected lobbyists, some with ties to Secretary of State John Kerry, including Kerry's former Senate chief of staff David Leiter, according to lobbying disclosures. As Time magazine reported, "Leiter's involvement in the firm rounds out a power-packed team of politically-connected Americans that also includes a second new board member, Devon Archer, a Democratic bundler and former adviser to John Kerry's 2004 presidential campaign. Both Archer and Hunter Biden have worked as business partners with Kerry's son-in-law, Christopher Heinz, the founding partner of Rosemont Capital, a private-equity company." [See Consortiumnews.com's "The Whys Behind the Ukraine Crisis."]

So, the Russians have a decidedly different view of the Ukrainian “reforms” than much of the U.S. media does. But I’m told that the Russians would be willing to tolerate these well-connected Americans enriching themselves in Ukraine and even having Ukraine expand its economic relations with the European Union.

But the Russians have drawn a red line at the prospect for the expansion of NATO forces into Ukraine and the continued killing of ethnic Russians at the hands of neo-Nazi death squads. Putin is demanding that those paramilitary forces be disarmed.

Besides unleashing these right-wing militias on the ethnic Russians, the Kiev government has moved to punish the people living in the eastern sectors by cutting off access to banks and other financial services. It also has become harder and more dangerous for ethnic Russians to cross into territory controlled by the Kiev authorities. Many are turned back and those who do get through face the risk of being taken and killed by the neo-Nazi militias.

These conditions have left the people in the Donetsk and Luhansk areas the so-called Donbass region on Russia’s border dependent on relief supplies from Russia. Meanwhile, the Kiev regime – pumped up by prospects of weapons from Washington as well as more money – has toughened its tone with vows to crush the eastern rebellion once and for all.

Russia’s Hardening Line

The worsening situation in the east and the fear of U.S. military weapons arriving in the west have prompted a shift in Moscow’s view of the Ukraine crisis, including a readiness to resupply the ethnic Russian forces in eastern Ukraine and even provide military advisers.

These developments have alarmed European leaders who find themselves caught in the middle of a possible conflict between the United States and Russia. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande rushed to Kiev and then Moscow this week to discuss possible ways to defuse the crisis.

The hardening Russian position now seeks, in effect, a division of Ukraine into two autonomous zones, the east and the west with a central government that maintains the currency and handles other national concerns. But I’m told that Moscow might still accept the earlier idea of a federated Ukraine with greater self-governance by the different regions.

Putin also does not object to Ukraine building closer economic ties to Europe and he offered a new referendum in Crimea on whether the voters still want to secede from Ukraine and join Russia, said a source familiar with the Kremlin’s thinking. But Putin’s red lines include no NATO expansion into Ukraine and

protection for ethnic Russians by disarming the neo-Nazi militias, the source said.

If such an arrangement or something similar isn't acceptable and if the killing of ethnic Russians continues, the Kremlin would support a large-scale military offensive from the east that would involve "taking Kiev," according to the source.

A Russian escalation of that magnitude would likely invite a vigorous U.S. response, with leading American politicians and pundits sure to ratchet up demands for a military counterstrike against Russia. If Obama were to acquiesce to such bellicosity to avoid being called "weak" the world could be pushed to the brink of nuclear war.

Who's to Blame?

Though the State Department and the mainstream U.S. media continue to put all the blame on Russia, the fact that the Ukraine crisis has reach such a dangerous crossroads reveals how reckless the behavior of Official Washington has been over the past year.

Nuland and other U.S. officials took an internal Ukrainian disagreement over how quickly it should expand ties to Europe while seeking to retain its historic relations with Russia and turned that fairly pedestrian political dispute into a possible flashpoint for a nuclear war.

At no time, as this crisis has evolved over the past year, did anyone of significance in Official Washington, whether in government or media, stop and contemplate whether this issue was worth risking the end of life on the planet. Instead, all the American people have been given is a steady diet of anti-Yanukovych and anti-Putin propaganda.

Though constitutionally elected, Yanukovych was depicted as a corrupt tyrant who had a pricy sauna in his official mansion. Though Putin had just staged the Winter Olympics in Sochi, signaling his desire for Russia to integrate more with the West, he was portrayed as either a new-age imperial czar or the second coming of Hitler if not worse because he occasionally would ride on a horse while not wearing a shirt.

Further, the U.S. news media refused to conduct a serious investigation into the evidence that Nuland and other U.S. officials had helped destabilize Yanukovych's government with the goal of achieving another neocon "regime change."

Nuland, who personally urged on anti-Yanukovych protests in Kiev, discussed with

U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt in early February 2014 who should lead the new government “Yats is the guy,” she said, referring to Arseniy Yatsenyuk and how to “glue this thing.”

After weeks of mounting tensions and worsening violence, the coup occurred on Feb. 22, 2014, when well-organized neo-Nazi and other right-wing militias from western Ukraine overran presidential buildings forcing officials to flee for their lives. With Yanukovych ousted, Yatsenyuk soon became Prime Minister. [See Consortiumnews.com’s [“When Is a Putsch a Putsch.”](#)]

Many ethnic Russians in southern and eastern Ukraine, who had strongly supported Yanukovych, refused to accept the new U.S.-backed order in Kiev. Crimean officials and voters moved to secede from Ukraine and rejoin Russia, a move that Putin accepted because of Crimea’s historic ties to Russia and his fear that the Russian naval base at Sevastopol might be handed to NATO.

The resistance spread to eastern Ukraine where other ethnic Russians took up arms against the coup regime in Kiev, which responded with that it called an “anti-terrorist operation” against the east. To bolster the weak Ukrainian army, Internal Affairs Minister Arsen Avakov dispatched neo-Nazi and other “volunteer” militias to spearhead the attacks.

After the deaths of more than 5,000 people, a shaky cease-fire was announced in September, but – amid complaints about neo-Nazi death squads operating in government-controlled areas and with life deteriorating in rebel-controlled towns and cities – the ethnic Russians launched an offensive in January, using Russian-supplied weapons to expand their control of territory.

In reaction, U.S. pundits, including columnists and editors of the New York Times and the Washington Post, called for dispatching U.S. aid to the Kiev forces, including proposals for lethal weaponry to deter Putin’s “aggression.” Members of Congress and members of the Obama administration have joined the chorus.

On Feb. 2, the New York Times [reported](#) “With Russian-backed separatists pressing their attacks in Ukraine, NATO’s military commander, Gen. Philip M. Breedlove, now supports providing defensive weapons and equipment to Kiev’s beleaguered forces, and an array of administration and military officials appear to be edging toward that position, American officials said. President Obama has made no decisions on providing such lethal assistance.”

That same day, the lead Times editorial was entitled “Mr. Putin Resumes His War” and continued with the theme about “Russian aggression” and the need “to increase the cost” if Russia demands “a permanent rebel-held enclave.”

On Feb. 3, the Washington Post ran an editorial entitled “Help for Ukraine. Defensive weapons could deter Russia in a way sanctions won’t.” The editorial concluded that Putin “will stop only if the cost to his regime is sharply raised and quickly.”

A new war fever gripped Washington and no one wanted to be viewed as “soft” or to be denounced as a “Putin apologist.” Amid this combination of propaganda, confusion and tough-guy-ism and lacking the tempering wisdom about war and nuclear weapons that restrained earlier U.S. presidents a momentum lurched toward a nuclear showdown over Ukraine that could put all life on earth in jeopardy.

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](#)). You also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only \$34. The trilogy includes *America’s Stolen Narrative*. For details on this offer, [click here](#).

US Deports Professor Sami Al-Arian

One of the ugliest post-9/11 trials was the terrorism prosecution of a Palestinian immigrant, Dr. Sami Al-Arian, for using strong words in criticizing Israel and backing Palestinian rights, a case that amounted to thought crimes. It has now ended with Al-Arian’s deportation, note Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett.

By Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett

Earlier this week, the U.S. government deported our friend and colleague, Dr. Sami Al-Arian, from the United States. Turkey has granted him sanctuary.

Since we first met Dr. Al-Arian a few years ago, he and his family have set standards for faithfulness, moral steadfastness, and commitment to truth to which we can only aspire. More broadly, the U.S. government’s treatment of Dr. Al-Arian underscores an urgent reality: how the West treats Muslims, in the Middle East, where they are the overwhelming majority, and in diaspora communities in the West itself, is the defining moral and political challenge of our time.

The U.S. government's actions against Sami Al-Arian and his family should remind all of us how badly the United States is failing that challenge.

Sami Al-Arian was targeted by the U.S. government because, during the 1990s, he emerged as one of the most prominent and effective advocates for Palestinian rights that U.S. officials had ever faced.

To offer some insight into his case and what it means, we highlight here two pieces. One, by Glenn Greenwald and his colleague at *The Intercept*, Murtaza Hussain, see [here](#), assesses the U.S. government's case against Dr. Al-Arian as a glaring example of post-9/11 "America's eroding democratic values."

This article explains how, as "part of a broader post-9/11 campaign by the U.S. government to criminalize aid and support to Palestinians," Dr. Al-Arian was "indicted on multiple counts of providing 'material support' to [Palestinian Islamic Jihad] and fundraising on their behalf in the United States."

As the article recounts, "For most of the three years after his arrest, Al-Arian was kept in solitary confinement awaiting trial. During this time, he was regularly subjected to strip-searches, denied normal visitation rights with his family, and allegedly abused by prison staff. When Al-Arian's case did finally reach trial after years of harsh imprisonment, prosecutors failed to convict Al-Arian on even one charge brought against him. Jurors voted to acquit him on the most serious counts he faced and deadlocked on the remainder of the indictments.

"The outcome was hugely embarrassing for the U.S. government. Despite having amassed over 20,000 hours of phone conversations and hundreds of fax messages from over a decade of surveilling Al-Arian, the [Justice Department], even with all the advantages they enjoyed in terrorism cases in 2003 (and continue to enjoy today), was unable to convince a jury Al-Arian was the arch-terrorist they had very publicly proclaimed him to be.

"Indeed, instead of producing evidence that Al-Arian was involved in actual 'terrorism,' the government attempted to use as evidence copies of books and magazines Al-Arian had owned in a failed effort to convince the jury to convict him of apparent thought crimes. This effort failed and a jury ruled to acquit Al-Arian on 8 out of 17 charges while failing to come to a verdict on the remainder."

The article goes on to describe how, after his trial, "Al-Arian agreed to a plea bargain on the remaining charges by pleading guilty to one count of providing 'contributions, goods or services' to [Palestinian Islamic Jihad], a decision he says he undertook out of a desire to end the government's ongoing persecution of him and win his release from prison."

Still, “despite this plea, Al-Arian was not released from prison”; instead, the U.S. government plunged him into a legally Kafkaesque series of additional imprisonments on “civil contempt” charges. Finally, in 2014, after years of relentlessly persecuting Dr. Al-Arian, “the Federal government quietly and unceremoniously dropped all of their charges against [him].”

The second piece we want to highlight is a statement by Sami Al-Arian, released after his departure from the United States. We append it below.

“To my dear friends and supporters,

“After 40 years, my time in the U.S. has come to an end. Like many immigrants of my generation, I came to the U.S. in 1975 to seek a higher education and greater opportunities. But I also wanted to live in a free society where freedom of speech, association and religion are not only tolerated but guaranteed and protected under the law. That’s why I decided to stay and raise my family here, after earning my doctorate in 1986. Simply put, to me, freedom of speech and thought represented the cornerstone of a dignified life.

“Today, freedom of expression has become a defining feature in the struggle to realize our humanity and liberty. The forces of intolerance, hegemony, and exclusionary politics tend to favor the stifling of free speech and the suppression of dissent. But nothing is more dangerous than when such suppression is perpetrated and sanctioned by government.

“As one early American once observed, ‘When the people fear their government, there is tyranny; when the government fears the people, there is liberty.’ Because government has enormous power and authority over its people, such control must be checked, and people, especially those advocating unpopular opinions, must have absolute protections from governmental overreach and abuse of power.

A case in point of course is the issue of Palestinian self-determination. In the United States, as well as in many other western countries, those who support the Palestinian struggle for justice, and criticize Israel’s occupation and brutal policies, have often experienced an assault on their freedom of speech in academia, media, politics and society at large.

“After the tragic events of September 11th, such actions by the government intensified, in the name of security. Far too many people have been targeted and punished because of their unpopular opinions or beliefs.

“During their opening statement in my trial in June 2005, my lawyers showed the jury two poster-sized photographs of items that government agents took during searches of my home many years earlier. In one photo, there were several stacks

of books taken from my home library. The other photo showed a small gun I owned at the time.

“The attorney looked the jury in the eyes and said: ‘This is what this case is about. When the government raided my client’s house, this is what they seized,’ he said, pointing to the books, ‘and this is what they left,’ he added, pointing to the gun in the other picture. ‘This case is not about terrorism but about my client’s right to freedom of speech,’ he continued.

“Indeed, much of the evidence the government presented to the jury during the six-month trial were speeches I delivered, lectures I presented, articles I wrote, magazines I edited, books I owned, conferences I convened, rallies I attended, interviews I gave, news I heard, and websites I never even accessed.

“But the most disturbing part of the trial was not that the government offered my speeches, opinions, books, writings, and dreams into evidence, but that an intimidated judicial system allowed them to be admitted into evidence. That’s why we applauded the jury’s verdict.

“Our jurors represented the best society had to offer. Despite all of the fear-mongering and scare tactics used by the authorities, the jury acted as free people, people of conscience, able to see through Big Brother’s tactics. One hard lesson that must be learned from the trial is that political cases should have no place in a free and democratic society.

“But despite the long and arduous ordeal and hardships suffered by my family, I leave with no bitterness or resentment in my heart whatsoever. In fact, I’m very grateful for the opportunities and experiences afforded to me and my family in this country, and for the friendships we’ve cultivated over the decades. These are lifelong connections that could never be affected by distance.

“I would like to thank God for all the blessings in my life. My faith sustained me during my many months in solitary confinement and gave me comfort that justice would ultimately prevail.

“Our deep thanks go to the friends and supporters across the U.S., from university professors to grassroots activists, individuals and organizations, who have stood alongside us in the struggle for justice.

“My trial attorneys, Linda Moreno and the late Bill Moffitt, were the best advocates anyone could ask for, both inside and outside of the courtroom. Their spirit, intelligence, passion and principle were inspirational to so many.

“I am also grateful to Jonathan Turley and his legal team, whose tireless efforts saw the case to its conclusion. Jonathan’s commitment to justice and

brilliant legal representation resulted in the government finally dropping the case. Our gratitude also goes to my immigration lawyers, Ira Kurzban and John Pratt, for the tremendous work they did in smoothing the way for this next phase of our lives.

“Thanks also to my children for their patience, perseverance and support during the challenges of the last decade. I am so proud of them. Finally, my wife Nahla has been a pillar of love, strength and resilience. She kept our family together during the most difficult times. There are no words to convey the extent of my gratitude.

“We look forward to the journey ahead and take with us the countless happy memories we formed during our life in the United States.”

Flynt Leverett served as a Middle East expert on George W. Bush’s National Security Council staff until the Iraq War and worked previously at the State Department and at the Central Intelligence Agency. Hillary Mann Leverett was the NSC expert on Iran and from 2001 to 2003 was one of only a few U.S. diplomats authorized to negotiate with the Iranians over Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and Iraq. They are authors of *Going to Tehran*.

From Tiger Cages to Soup Kitchens

Exclusive: As a young man, Don Luce crossed paths with history in Vietnam, evolving from a gung-ho U.S. aid worker into a persuasive opponent of the war, famously exposing the use of “tiger cages” to hold political prisoners, but his life took other remarkable turns, as Ted Lieberman describes.

By Ted Lieberman

On a wet, chilly Wednesday night in April 2013, Don Luce opens the weekly parolee class at Community Missions, a homeless shelter and soup kitchen in Niagara Falls, New York. The meetings are a loose collection of practical lessons useful for those trying to re-enter the outside world after prison: common grammar and vocabulary usage mistakes, basic statistical concepts, advice on work and educational opportunities.

Attendance is encouraged but not mandatory, and several of the students show up late, others don’t make it at all, and one anxious woman wordlessly leaves within 15 minutes. A man called Angel happily announces that he has just been

hired at a furniture store. Two guests, Carol and Marcia, are managers from Target, come to give pointers on job interviews.

Not surprisingly, the key question the parolees have is how to talk about their criminal convictions and prison sentences. "Don't lie," warn the guests; openly talk about it but be sure to describe how you're not the same person anymore, how you've learned from the experience. "What if it was bad?" asks Desmond, an anxious parolee. How bad? Well, he cut another inmate. . . with a knife . . . and got sent to maximum confinement. He is now 21 years old.

Luce hears such stories often. He empathizes with the parolees and understands the difficulties they face. He has seen worse. In fact, Don Luce has spent most of his life working with prisoners – those in physical prisons made of iron and stone, and the metaphorical prisoners of poverty and war.

He lived and worked in Vietnam from 1958 until his expulsion in 1971, first as an aid worker, then a journalist; first a supporter of the American war effort, then a pacifist and war opponent. His sincerity and intimate knowledge of Vietnamese life – he is still fluent in Vietnamese, a notoriously difficult language for westerners to master – made his writings and speeches about Vietnam so effective that the last U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam, Graham Martin, testifying before Congress in 1976, paid Luce the ultimate back-handed compliment: that Luce was one of the principal reasons the U.S. lost the war.

Helping Others

Luce's quiet courage, his dedication to helping those that Camus called the humiliated and debased, inspired a generation of young humanitarian volunteers who went to Vietnam. Jacqui Chagnon, an aid worker who met Luce in Vietnam in the late 1960s, said Luce "was probably one of the most formative people in my life for my values and for the way I was to work in the future."

Fred Branfman, who displayed his own remarkable courage exposing the U.S. bombing of Laos during the four years he was there, called Luce a "genuine American hero" – incredibly courageous, very little ego, total commitment to protecting the Vietnamese.

Luce is perhaps best remembered for helping members of the U.S. Congress uncover the infamous "tiger cage" prison cells in South Vietnam in 1970. Less well-known are his successes in helping convince North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces to release American journalists from custody, and persuading a South Vietnamese warden to release student activists through the liberal application of Johnny Walker and Marlboros.

Just turned 80, Luce still travels to Vietnam regularly, and is still working

full-time closer to home to aid the poor and dispossessed. In his thirties and forties, he says, he tried to change the big policies; “now I try to concentrate on helping a few people have an easier life.” Now, he says, he looks at life “from a Niagara Falls soup kitchen perspective.”

The Aid Worker

Luce grew up on a 220-acre farm in East Calais, Vermont, a small village of some 200 people. A family caregiver told him stories about the work of missionaries in Africa, and he developed a strong desire to do good works overseas. Luce joined International Voluntary Services (IVS), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that was the model for the Peace Corps. IVS’s biggest project was in South Vietnam, a country suffering from extreme poverty, autocratic government and a growing leftist insurgency but there were no U.S. combat troops there yet. IVS received virtually all of the money for its Vietnam program from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

In 1958, Luce saw himself as a typical farm boy with no real interest in politics. He thought Dwight Eisenhower was a good president, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles a great man, and American support for South Vietnam important in saving America from communism. On Nov. 9, 1958, he arrived in South Vietnam and was sent to Ban Me Thuot, a provincial capital in the Central Highlands largely populated with Catholics who, at the urging of the Americans and South Vietnamese officials, had fled the communist North.

For the first month, he studied the Vietnamese language with a 15 year-old boy, much of the instruction transmitted by playing the Vietnamese dice game called Horse. By Christmas Eve, Luce was able to appear at the local church and give a simple speech, which Luce describes as, “Hello, my name is Don. I am fine. I am glad to be in Viet Nam. Thank you very much.” His language skills improved as he worked to introduce a higher yielding strain of sweet potatoes to the peasant farmers.

Life in Saigon

In 1960, Luce became associate country director for IVS and moved to Saigon; in 1961, he was appointed IVS Country Director for Vietnam. During his time as director, the IVS mission widened its mission from agricultural advice to include teaching and community development, and it also started accepting female volunteers; by 1967, IVS had 120 volunteers in Vietnam.

Luce was known for being soft-spoken and relying on a low-keyed, understated style of leadership. He was very calm, stable, and confident, but he worked constantly, was very determined, “consumed with the Vietnamese cause,” in the

words of one former volunteer.

Gloria Emerson, the *New York Times* correspondent in Vietnam for three years, described Luce as “a gentle and austere man, born without a temper, almost unable to return anger.” Carl Robinson of Associated Press later referred to him as “a deceptively calm and unemotional person.”

When conflict arose, Luce generally avoided personal attacks to focus on institutional or policy failures. He believed that people doing bad things could generally be convinced that their conduct was wrong, or counterproductive, and could change. Asked about his calm approach, Luce quotes a line from the poetry of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, “Remember, brother, remember / Man is not our enemy.”

The IVS volunteers in Vietnam were idealistic and motivated to do good, but it was hard for them to ignore the effects of the conflict. Luce himself began having doubts about the efficacy of the American effort.

A speech by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara in 1964 seemed to symbolize the problem. McNamara had come to Saigon for consultations on the war and later addressed a large crowd of civil servants and Saigonese supporters of the government. Luce was there with some of his students.

At the end of his remarks in English, McNamara raised his arms in the air to shout in Vietnamese, “*Viet Nam muon nam*,” intending to say “Vietnam will win.” Unfortunately for the Secretary, Vietnamese is a tonal language in which words have very different meanings depending on the accent and inflection. What McNamara had actually said to the bemused crowd astute enough to nevertheless cheer loudly was “The southern duck wants to lie down.”

Growing Doubts

As the American military effort in Vietnam ratcheted up in 1965, IVS found itself being dragged into the conflict. Some were killed, and a number of IVS staff started to openly question the merits of their own work. By 1967, Luce and others decided that their work with IVS could not really help the Vietnamese in the midst of the American war effort.

At a big staff meeting over the July Fourth weekend in 1967, Luce and three other senior staff announced they were resigning from IVS. A group of volunteers together drafted a letter to President Lyndon Johnson expressing their dismay with the war; 49 volunteers signed the letter. A group of IVSers presented the letter to U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon. Luce says the Ambassador was “cordial” but called their handling of the letter and resignations “unethical and discourteous.”

Vice President Hubert Humphrey later called the IVS resignations “one of the greatest disservices to the American effort in Viet Nam.” On the other hand, many Vietnamese were supportive of the letter. One Vietnamese acquaintance said, “We thought you were CIA but now we know differently.” Luce began to be noticed in the press.

Luce returned to the U.S. in September 1967 and spent several months at Cornell University as a research associate, and also gave speeches around the country on his misgivings about the war. Luce and former IVS team leader John Sommer also used that year to write a book, *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices*, which Luce saw as an extension of their letter to President Johnson, describing the terrible destruction that the war was causing.

The book had an impact because it was written by Americans who spoke the language, and knew a good deal about the culture of Vietnam from spending long days and weeks with peasants, slum dwellers, internal refugees and students. It was not so much an analysis of American strategy as a description of what was happening to the Vietnamese.

“We were trying to find a way to give the Vietnamese a voice in the debate,” Luce says.

In mid-1968, Luce returned to Vietnam, this time funded by the World Council of Churches to ostensibly write a report on post-war reconstruction assuming there would be a post-war. Luce understood his mandate more broadly, to “do what you feel is important to be done in Vietnam.”

Most of his efforts went into freelance journalism – but he quickly learned that his authorship did not count for much with the press and tried a different approach. He worked with his Vietnamese friends and acquaintances to uncover stories about prisons, poverty, refugees in the camps and urban slums, and what the voluntary agencies were doing.

Living Above a Brothel

Luce lived in a top floor apartment of a seventh-floor walk-up on Avenue Louis Pasteur in the heart of Saigon; the floors below him housed a brothel for American soldiers. Luce used to spend time in conversation with the sex workers and got to know a number of them well; he saw them as similar in many ways to the political prisoners, being degraded and held hostage by the war.

In late 1969 or early 1970, some of his Saigon students asked Luce to assist in freeing a student being held prisoner at Thu Duc prison on the outskirts of Saigon. How do I do that, Luce asked in confusion. Simple, said the students, you’re an American, you can do anything. The warden likes Johnny Walker; take

him a bottle and a carton of Marlboro cigarettes.

Luce tried it, purchasing his gifts from the American PX. He offered the warden the carton of Marlboros, and they shared a drink from the bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label that Luce had brought . . . then another, then more. After a while, the warden was in a very friendly mood and Luce, who rarely drank alcohol, was close to drunk.

Luce started, you have one of my students here, he's very anticommunist, pro-American (Luce was inventing here), can't you release him to my custody? The warden initially shook his head, saying "You Americans don't understand." Luce kept asking, can't you give me just this one? Finally, the warden ordered an aide to go get the prisoner in question: "I don't want him anymore."

The freed prisoner laughed hysterically with happiness and relief as they drove back to town, and they were met by joyous students. "We didn't think you could really do it," one told Luce.

Luce tried this on another half dozen trips, always bringing a bottle of Johnny Walker and a carton of Marlboros. The warden was always pleasant but did not always release a prisoner – though once he released three prisoners at one time. Luce did not visit the warden again after July 1970; after the tiger cages incident, "he probably would have shot me."

Freeing Journalists

Luce even succeeded in aiding the release of imprisoned Americans. In May 1970, three American journalists were captured while reporting in Cambodia: Richard Dudman of the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, Michael Morrow of Dispatch News Service, and Elizabeth Pond of the *Christian Science Monitor*. No one knew initially who held them, although it was suspected that they had been captured by either Viet Cong or North Vietnamese troops.

Luce knew the reporters and wanted to do something to assist in their release. He was sure that some of his students were secretly connected to the liberation forces but didn't know which ones. During class, he told his students that the three reporters were decent, honest journalists and that if any of the students had any contacts that might assist in their release, he hoped that they would pass the word.

Soon after that, Luce received a message by word of mouth, telling him that some people would like to talk to him about the reporters. He was instructed to go to Brodard, a fancy bakery and ice cream parlor on Tu Do (now renamed Dong Khoi) Street in Saigon, at a certain time, and that he would be invited to join some people.

Luce went to the parlor at the appointed time and sat down. After a few minutes, a friendly Vietnamese man invited Luce to join him and his friend. The two Vietnamese had heard about banana splits and ordered one each. As they ate, Luce answered questions about the three reporters and passed around articles they had written.

On June 15, the three journalists were freed on Highway 1 inside Cambodia and got a ride to Saigon on South Vietnamese Army trucks. Luce received another message thanking him for his "important" information which had been helpful, and that his friends had been released.

As it happens, Luce was not the only one working on the journalists' release. Unknown to him, Pham Xuan An, North Vietnam's top spy in the South whose cover was a writer for *Time* Magazine and who had been Pond's interpreter, conveyed his own messages to the North Vietnamese military command, urging them to free his friends.

As Luce says, "It's one of those things you never know, beyond the banana split, just what happened."

Uncovering the Tiger Cages

Undoubtedly, Luce is principally famous – or infamous, depending on one's views – for his role in uncovering the "tiger cages," tiny prison cells used by the South Vietnamese government to hold recalcitrant prisoners.

In 1970, Con Son prison – located on the principal island of the Con Dau archipelago, some 60 miles off of the coast of South Vietnam – housed almost 10,000 prisoners, of which some 500 were political prisoners kept in small cages in a walled-off section. Luce had heard about the tiger cages and relayed what he knew to Tom Harkin, then a Congressional staff aide to a delegation of Congressmen visiting Vietnam (Harkin was later elected to the U.S. Senate).

Harkin arranged to have two of the Congressmen travel to Con Son and try to uncover the secret tiger cages – cages that the South Vietnamese and U.S. governments said no longer existed. They succeeded in a dramatic fashion, bringing out a first-hand account and photographs of the miserable conditions.

The tiger cage story, coming out shortly after the American invasion of Cambodia and the widespread campus demonstrations (including the killing of four students at Kent State by Ohio National Guard troops), received widespread international coverage in which Luce was frequently quoted. The South Vietnamese government soon announced that the tiger cage unit was being demolished and treatment of prisoners upgraded.

The South Vietnamese government took a dim view of Luce's activities, particularly the attention given to Con Son prison. In October 1970, the Saigon government informed Luce that his press card would be revoked. Luce's landlady, happy to run a large brothel but nervous about tenants who criticized the government, evicted him.

Now Luce was followed while walking around the city. He came home to his new apartment one night to find the door broken, his papers searched, and a poisonous snake tied inside of his bed sheets. On April 17, 1971, Luce received an official letter expelling him from the country and left two weeks later.

The Activist

Now back in the U.S., Luce became a full-time antiwar activist. He and other IVS veterans created the Indochina Mobile Education Project, affiliated with the Indochina Resource Center and Project Air War, three nonprofits operating from a small four-story office building just off Dupont Circle in Washington.

He and most of the staff spent their time touring the country in two minivans, named Winnie Wham and Dangerous Dan, to talk about the war and its effects on both Vietnam and America. They hit almost every state in the continental U.S. and spent a lot of time in small towns. The main event always featured a Vietnamese dinner which Don and his team would cook, usually *thich ga* (stewed chicken) and *goi ga* (chicken salad made with cabbage). Dinner cost \$4 to \$5 and was an effective draw, generally netting anywhere from 100 to 125 people.

Chagnon remembers Luce as a persuasive speaker, quiet but firm, speaking about values, not ideology. Luce would say – truthfully – that he was just a farm boy and proceed from there. Their days often lasted from 6 a.m. until 11 p.m.; Chagnon says it was like being part of a political campaign.

Not everyone reacted well to the antiwar message. In Augusta Georgia, a man announced he wanted to kill Luce for being a foreigner. "I'm from Vermont," Luce protested. "I told you you're a foreigner," the man replied and began to choke Luce. Later, Luce's office/living quarters in Washington were firebombed; he remembered how his green telephone melted from the heat with plastic icicles dripping down.

Backhanded Compliment

If Luce wondered about his effectiveness in hastening the end of the Vietnam War, he may have been somewhat reassured by the back-handed compliment he received from Graham Martin, the last U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam.

Testifying before a subcommittee of the House Committee on International

Relations on Jan. 27, 1976, Martin assured Congress that the final collapse of the South Vietnamese government had nothing to do with the policies of Saigon or Washington, but was caused "by one of the best propaganda and pressure organizations the world has ever seen," largely organized by the Indochina Resource Center and "the multi-faceted activities of Mr. Don Luce. . . . [T]hose individuals deserve enormous credit for a very effective performance."

Apparently too effective under the circumstances, as Martin continued, "I think we ought to look with some precision at organizations and their origins, their background and their affiliations, who are trying to influence American foreign policy."

Columnist Mary McGrory observed in the *New York Post*, "For those who know the [Indochina Resource] center, which is a shoestring enterprise quartered in a grubby house on 18th Street, it was a little grotesque."

Moving to Niagara Falls

In 1979, while working in New York, Luce met Mark Bonacci, and they have been together ever since. They moved to Niagara Falls in 1981, where Luce was doing some part-time teaching. Bonacci began teaching at Niagara Falls Community College, where he is now a tenured professor.

In 1979, Edward J. Rasen, a freelance journalist, sought Luce's help to get an exclusive interview with Pham Van Dong, then prime minister of the unified Vietnam, an iron-willed revolutionary compatriot of Ho Chi Minh and General Giap.

Rasen thought that Luce's good contacts with the Vietnamese might secure the interview, but there was one potential problem: he was selling the interview to *Penthouse* magazine, where the readership was primarily driven by the copious display of naked female flesh.

Luce arranged a meeting with the staff at the Vietnamese delegation to the United Nations in New York. Here's the advantage of doing the interview, Luce said: *Penthouse* had a large circulation in the U.S. (the publisher boasted that it exceeded five million worldwide at that time), particularly among two groups, members of the U.S. military and residents of Washington, D.C. The disadvantage, Luce continued, was, well- and here he handed out about a dozen back issues and suggested they look through them to understand what kind of content the magazine was based on.

Luce believed that the Vietnamese, though generally modest, did not have the same sexual hang-ups that existed in the U.S., and so he was not surprised that the government approved the interview request.

Rasen conducted the interview of Dong during a Summit Meeting of the Nonaligned Nations in Havana, Cuba, in September 1979, with Luce sharing the interpreting with one of Dong's official interpreters. *Penthouse* published the seven-page interview in its January 1980 issue, and both Rasen and Luce were given credit for the article.

A Shattered Land

Rasen asked Luce for help on another, even bigger story. In December 1978, the Vietnamese army invaded Cambodia to end the reign of the Khmer Rouge and was fighting its way across the country. Rasen wanted Luce to help an ABC camera crew explore the "liberated" areas and report on what had happened in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge.

Together with ABC correspondent Jim Laurie and a couple of Vietnamese and Cambodian minders, they drove their old Ford minivan from Saigon – now officially renamed Ho Chi Minh City – into Cambodia and across 11 of the 19 provinces for six weeks during the period November 1979-January 1980, conducting interviews and recording the almost complete destruction of Cambodian society. The documentary, *This Shattered Land*, aired on ABC on March 29, 1980.

Laurie, a seasoned journalist who stayed in Saigon for a month after the city fell in 1975, has nothing but praise for Luce. Luce constantly pitched in with whatever needed to be done, and was always on the lookout for Vietnamese speakers so that he could do interviews without going through the minders. He had an intuitive quality for the work and a good sense of people; he could get good material in the interviews.

"Luce is the ultimate humanitarian," he says, a man of character who was modest and understated and followed through on his promises. But Laurie also found him a man of mystery, quiet about his Vietnamese contacts.

For some reason, ABC had provisioned them with dozens of cans of peanuts. Whenever they stopped to eat, crowds of starving Cambodians would gather to sit around them and quietly watch. It was unthinkable to Luce that he and the news crew would simply eat in front of these shattered people, so he would pass the can of peanuts to the first Cambodian, who would take a single peanut and pass the can to the next person. That Cambodian would also take a single peanut and pass the can – and so it went around the circle until the can was empty.

Meeting Pol Pot

After travelling with Rasen and Laurie, Luce went back to northeastern Cambodia through Thailand with a different television news crew for an even more dicey assignment – accepting an invitation to interview Pol Pot, known as Brother

Number One, the head of the Khmer Rouge and the person most responsible for the death of some 1.7 million Cambodians during that reign of terror.

Actually, Luce isn't sure whether they were in Thailand or Cambodia at that point – the border, like the international politics concerning Thailand and the Khmer Rouge at that point, was ambiguous.

Upon reaching the Khmer Rouge camp, Pol Pot said you're just in time for dinner. It was chicken. How did Luce feel? "It's always a dilemma, what do you do if you meet someone truly evil? We ate the chicken."

Over the course of a couple of hours, Pol Pot was gregarious, displaying a lot of charisma, but Luce kept thinking of the mass graves he had seen, the horrors of the Tuol Sleng torture center, and the photograph of Sokham Hing, a friend who disappeared into the killing fields, on display at the Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh.

Pol Pot denied that any of the bodies were Khmer Rouge victims; he asserted that all of those people had been killed by the Vietnamese. Watched by armed guards, Luce and his party did not argue, feeling with some justification that they would not have gotten out alive if they had.

In 1998, Luce joined the staff of Community Missions in Niagara Falls, an all-purpose charity that runs a homeless shelter, soup kitchen, and assistance for parolees and those with mental or emotional problems. As Director of Public Relations, Luce helps publicize and run various fundraisers: the Gospel Fest, the Lobster Fest, the Sweetheart dinner, the golf classic, the 5k walk, and the November auction of donated antiques and fine arts. Most mornings during the week, he and his assistant, one of the shelter residents, pick up donated food at local supermarkets and restaurants.

Not Decrepit

Luce turned 80 last Sept. 20; he and Bonacci celebrated with a quiet dinner out. In May, they held a large party for 80 or 90 people at their apartment as a fundraiser for the Mission. Originally, the fundraising party was to celebrate Don and Mark's 35th anniversary on May 31, but they didn't want to provoke any antigay response that might hurt the Mission. So they shifted the theme to Luce's birthday and took in about \$5,000 in donations. Their elderly neighbor was reportedly confused as to why there were two male figurines standing atop the cake.

Luce remembers that his mother Margaret kept working even after turning 65 – the family was quite poor – and he thought that was terrible, working when you're old and decrepit, she should have more common sense. But Margaret lived until

she was 95 or 96, and now that Luce is 80, he finds his own views on work have changed. He has no plans to retire; indeed, he fears retirement.

“Golf would be incredibly boring,” he says. “Without work, I would probably stay home, do puzzles and eat; it sounds like fun in the short run, but I would quickly get bored.”

He’s moving slower than in the past, the result in part of a hip replacement about ten years ago, and he has to watch his diet due to diabetes, but he is far from decrepit (“I’ll charge you with deceiving people if you say I’m decrepit!”). He shrugs off the suggestion that he could get a comfortable job at a research institute somewhere; he’s happy continuing his life as it is.

He’s had the opportunity to work with wonderful people who faced incredible challenges, he says: Catholic refugees who fled communist North Vietnam, Saigon students who faced prison and torture for opposing the government in South Vietnam, families with AIDS in Cambodia, now the homeless and parolees in Niagara Falls.

Luce remembers that on one of his trips to Vietnam in 1973 or 1974, he was taken by jeep along the Ho Chi Minh trail, a dangerous journey considering that the U.S. or South Vietnamese planes were still bombing it to interdict North Vietnamese supplies.

At one point their jeep approached a river but showed no signs of slowing down. Now what, thought Luce, do I tell the driver there’s a river in front of us? Luce said nothing, the driver did not slacken his speed . . . and the jeep roared on, seemingly driving on water. A few inches below the surface of the water was a bridge, invisible from the air but solid, carrying the vehicle forward.

A great story – maybe even a metaphor for something, like how Luce has been able to follow his own path so clearly while many others never find the road. But Luce says that never occurred to him. It’s just a story about what happened.

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