

Beyond Bolton: The Path to a Progressive Foreign Policy

America's miserable record over 30 years should make it clear a serious and genuine commitment to the rule of international law offers a more viable way forward than the "law of the jungle," argue Nicolas Davies and Medea Benjamin.

By Nicolas J. S. Davies and Medea Benjamin

Special to Consortium News



Across the arc of chaos and instability caused by U.S. wars, interventions and sanctions around the world, the past several weeks have seen new flare-ups of deadly violence and worsening humanitarian crises.

A single day's headlines at the beginning of September included; ["School Hit in Huge Somali Explosion;](#) " ["US Army Sends More Military Equipment to Bases in Syria;](#) " ["Libya Announces State of Emergency in Capital Tripoli After 39 Deaths in Unrest;](#) " ["Lebanon Is Balancing on a Tightrope;](#) " ["Saudis Admit Strike on Bus Carrying Children Unjustified;](#) " ["Police Disperse Protesters at Entrance to Iraq's Nahr Bin Omar Oilfield.;](#) " ["Brazil Calls in Army After Mob Attacks on Venezuelan Migrants;](#) " ["Thousands Mourn Ukraine Rebel Leader;](#) " and an article about Afghanistan ["17th US Commander Takes Over America's Longest War."](#)

The last article, by *Voice of America*, reported that General Austin Miller is taking command of 14,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan as they soldier on in the "graveyard of empires" after 17 years of war. In the heady days after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 and the end of the Cold War, who would have predicted that America would soon be mired in its own quagmire in Afghanistan or that the fall of the Berlin Wall would usher in an era of U.S. wars that would sow violence and chaos across so much of the world?

And yet, it was precisely in those heady days at the end of the Cold War that what Mikhail Gorbachev has called Western ["triumphalism"](#) was born. In the bowels of the Pentagon, in corporate-funded Washington think tanks and in offices in the White House under Republican and Democratic administrations, ideologues linked to both parties dreamt of a Pax Americana or a New American Century in which the U.S. would be the unchallenged, even unchallengeable, imperial power.

Two former cold warriors, President Johnson's Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and President Reagan's Assistant Secretary of Defense Lawrence Korb, told the Senate Budget Committee in 1989 that the U.S. military budget could safely be cut in half over ten years. Committee Chairman Senator Jim Sasser hailed "this unique moment in world history" as "the dawn of the primacy of domestic economics."

Instead, despite small cuts in the early 1990s, the military budget never fell below the Cold War baseline established after the Korean and Vietnam Wars, and began climbing again in 1999. The longed-for, post-Cold War "peace dividend" was trumped by a "power dividend" born of triumphalism, wishful thinking and the "disastrous rise of misplaced power" in the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower recognized and warned against in his farewell speech to the nation in 1961.

Many who embraced the enticing vision of "monopoly leadership and domination," as Gorbachev called it, wanted to believe that a world ruled by American economic and military power would be a reflection of the best in American society. But these privileged members of the liberal elite were quite blind to the endemic injustices inside the United States, let alone the reality of life in the farther reaches of America's neocolonial empire, policed by head-chopping kings, corrupt dictators and murderous death squads.

Neocons Step In

John Bolton and the neocons were not so idealistic. They simply believed that the U.S. could use its many forms of economic, military and ideological power to impose a new world order that dissenters around the world would be powerless to resist. U.S. dominance would often have to be imposed by force, but resistance would be futile as long as America's leaders kept their nerve and were prepared to use as much force as necessary to impose their will.

This would require brainwashing new generations of Americans to fill the ranks of a poverty draft of imperial troops and an even larger army of passive consumers, taxpayers and voters who would embrace whatever dreams corporate America and its captive political and media systems conjured for them. Fortunately, the new generation is proving more intelligent, creative and revolutionary than the neocons imagined.

The central dystopian fantasy of the people who have run America for the past generation, drunk on these toxic cocktails of idealism and cynicism, is that the United States can govern the world as a preeminent, supranational economic and

military power, exercising the kind of “monopoly on violence” that national governments claim the right to within their own territory.

In this worldview, when the U.S. uses violence, it is legitimate, by definition; when U.S. opponents use violence, it is illegitimate, also by definition. Noam Chomsky refers to this as “the single standard,” but it is the antithesis of an international order based on the rule of law, in which rules and standards would apply equally to all.

When Bolton threatened the prosecutors and judges of the International Criminal Court (ICC) with U.S. sanctions and prosecution in U.S. courts, even as he boasted that U.S. efforts to undermine the court have made it “ineffective,” he laid bare the disdain for the rule of international law in America’s “single standard.”

It is not the ICC that “constrain(s) the United States,” but binding multilateral treaties like the UN Charter and the Geneva Conventions, which were signed and ratified by a wiser generation of American leaders and which Article VI (2) of the United States Constitution defines as part of the “supreme law of the land.” The ICC did not invent these treaties, but it is necessary to enforce them, so Bolton’s speech was just a political attack, with no legal basis, to preserve U.S. impunity for war crimes.

In his opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Senator Edward Kennedy described the 2002 U.S. National Security Strategy, the ideological blueprint for the invasion, as “a call for 21st century American imperialism that no other nation can or should accept.” But Kennedy’s faith that the rest of the world would reject and resist resurgent U.S. imperialism was overly optimistic, at least in the short to medium term. Despite an international uproar against the US-led invasion of Iraq, the U.S. war machine rolled on, and other countries have made their accommodations with this ugly reality.

Now the U.S. is outsourcing its wars, arming proxies around the world as a substitute for direct U.S. military action. This minimizes both domestic opposition from a war-weary U.S. public and growing international resistance to the catastrophic results of U.S. wars, while U.S. military-industrial interests are well served by ever-growing arms sales to allied governments.

In a new Code Pink report, “War Profiteers: The U.S. War Machine and the Arming of Repressive Regimes,” we explore the links between the U.S. weapons industry and the atrocities that Saudi Arabia, Israel and Egypt have used its products to commit, from bombing school buses, marketplaces and hospitals in Yemen to massacring civilians in Gaza and Cairo.

Toward a Progressive Foreign Policy

As we approach the 2018 U.S. midterm election, Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign has served as a template for progressive candidates to stake out more radical positions on healthcare, criminal justice reform, college tuition and other domestic issues. Sanders has successfully tested these positions in a national campaign, but there has been precious little talk of what a more progressive U.S. foreign policy would look like.

Congressman Adam Smith, who would likely become the chair of the House Armed Services Committee if the Democrats win a majority in November, has promised to trim the Trump administration's nuclear weapons ambitions, and to provide more oversight of the U.S. role in Yemen and "special" operations in countries like Niger.

But we believe that the illegitimate and destructive form of U.S. militarism that has evolved since the end of the Cold War requires a much more fundamental rethink, not just some trimming around the edges. The world desperately needs American progressives to confront the catastrophic results and existential dangers of the "21st Century American imperialism" that the late Senator Kennedy presciently warned against before its violence and chaos become even more widespread and intractable.

Just as Senator Sanders' domestic positions are designed to confront the fundamental problems of our society and to propose real solutions to them, progressive politicians must confront the disaster of our militarized foreign policy at its roots, and likewise propose real solutions.

So here are three foundations of a progressive U.S. foreign policy that we would ask progressive office holders and candidates to adopt in 2018:

- An explicit commitment to diplomacy to achieve peaceful coexistence with all our neighbors in a multipolar world, upholding universal protections for human rights and social justice, but not seeking to impose them by force;
- A call for the belated realization of the post-Cold War peace dividend. We suggest cutting the FY2018 US military budget by 50 percent over the next 10 years, as McNamara and Korb called for in 1989. The savings of over \$3 trillion per decade could go a long way toward addressing critical social and environmental needs.
- A serious U.S. commitment to the rule of international law, including the UN Charter's prohibition against the threat or use of force. To make this enforceable, the U.S. must accept the binding jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and International Criminal Court

(ICC).

A 50 percent cut in U.S. military spending sounds radical, but this would only be [a 25 percent cut](#) from the Cold War baseline that U.S. military spending fell to in the 1950s after the Korean War, in the 1970s after the Vietnam War, and again in the 1990s.

The third item may be a more radical and far-reaching change in U.S. policy: a U.S. agreement to simply be bound by the same rules of international law as our less powerful neighbors.

Under [the UN Charter](#), all nations have agreed to settle their differences peacefully, and the Charter therefore prohibits the threat or use of force unless authorized by the council. The monopoly on the use of force that the U.S. has tried to claim for itself is already reserved to the UN Security Council, not to any one country, alliance or coalition.

This has never worked perfectly or prevented all wars. Like domestic law, international law is an imperfect and evolving system of laws, courts and enforcement mechanisms. But all legal systems work best when the rich and powerful submit to their rules, and courts have the authority to hold even the most powerful people, institutions or countries accountable.

As President Roosevelt told a joint session of Congress after his meeting with Churchill and Stalin at Yalta in 1945,

“(The UN) ought to spell the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries—and have always failed. We propose to substitute for all these, a universal organization in which all peace-loving Nations will finally have a chance to join.”

Our miserable record over the past 30 years should make it clear to any doubtful American that a serious and genuine commitment to the UN Charter and the rule of international law offers us a more viable, sustainable and peaceful way forward than our deluded leaders’ reversion to the “law of the jungle” or “might makes right,” which has predictably led only to intractable violence and chaos.

Politicians running in the midterm elections and voters who want to end U.S. wars should adopt and uphold these common sense positions.

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Iraq. Medea Benjamin is cofounder of CODEPINK Women for Peace, and author of several books, including Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic. They have also co-authored War Profiteers: The U.S. War Machine and the Arming of Repressive Regimes for the Divest From the War Machine campaign.

Antifa or Antiwar: Leftist Exclusionism Against the Quest for Peace

The War Party's ultra-left wing uses different arguments to arrive at the same conclusions: Syria & Russia are enemies. Instead of practical solutions to real problems, they spread suspicion, distrust & enmity, argues Diana Johnstone.

By **Diana Johnstone** *Special to Consortium News*



CounterPunch has astonished many of its old fans by its current fundraising ad portraying the site as a prime target of Russia hostility. Under the slogan, "We have all the right enemies", CP portrays itself as a brave little crew being blown off the water by an evil Russian warship out to eliminate "lefty scum."

Ha Ha Ha, it's all a joke of course. But it's a joke that plays into the dangerous, current Russophobia promoted by Clintonite media, the deep state and the War Party. This is a reminder that Russophobia finds a variant in the writing of several prominent *CounterPunch* contributors.

Yes, *CounterPunch* continues to publish many good articles, but appears also to be paying its tribute to the establishment narrative.

Put on the defensive by the "fake news" assault against independent media, CP senior editor Jeffrey St Clair seemed to be shaken by *Washington Post* allegations that he had published articles by a "Russian troll" named Alice Donovan. St Clair never publicly questioned the FBI claim that the ephemeral plagiarist worked for the Kremlin, when she could as well have been planted by the FBI itself or some other agency, precisely in order to embarrass and intimidate the independent website.

The 'Step Toward Fascism'

The anti-Russian attitude on CP is promoted mainly by the same writers who stigmatize the slightest suggestion of building a broad non-ideological antiwar

movement as a step toward “fascism”. This leftist exclusionism goes against the traditions of the website founded by Alexander Cockburn and St Clair, and indeed, *CounterPunch* was fiercely attacked less than three years ago for its “red-brown”, or “QuerFront” tendencies.

The attack, originating on a German site, warned that leftists who publish on *CounterPunch* “are unwittingly helping to promote the agenda of the far right”. This article spelled out the Antifa doctrine:

“The idea of a red-brown alliance, or *Querfront* (German for ‘transversal front’), has been a recurrent motif in far-right thought over the past century. Craving the legitimacy that an alliance with progressive forces can provide, reactionaries seize on ostensibly shared positions, chief amongst them opposition to corrupt élites, to create the impression that progressives could benefit from making common cause with them.

“*Querfront* (also known as ‘third position’) propaganda can be highly seductive. Today’s (crypto)-fascist and other hard-right suitors, for example, focus on the commonplace left themes of opposition to war and corporate globalisation, the depredations of the ‘banksters’, civil liberties, and Palestinian solidarity.”

So, you genuine leftists, beware: if someone seems to agree with you, it may be a far righter out to ensnare you into her web.

The article gave advice on how to tell a *QuerFront* argument from a true leftist one:

“A serious left analysis, say, of US support for Israeli apartheid will start by looking at the documented record of US foreign policy as a whole”, whereas the red-brown, *QuerFront* third-positions position will say: “A foreign lobby has taken over the US government and media, and is forcing the US to act against ‘American interests’ and ‘American values’, and anyone who says otherwise is a Zionist infiltrator.”

So you mustn’t blame Zionists for Israel, it’s all Washington’s fault.

CounterPunch contributors singled out as dangerous right-wingers included Ralph Nader, Alison Weir, Ron Paul, Gilad Atzmon, Israel Shamir, Paul Craig Roberts and even Alexander Cockburn himself.

In his reply to the article, published on its website, St. Clair seemed to understand exactly where this was coming from.

Caity Gets Counter-Punched

Thus it was surprising when, last July, *CounterPunch* ran a whole series of

articles attacking independent antiwar blogger Caitlin Johnstone (no relation) for some inconsequential remark about her willingness to join in opposing war even with male supremacist Mike Cernovich. The purists pounced on the incongruity of a hypothetical Caitlin-Cernovich alliance as an opportunity to ridicule the more general principle of a broad single-issue antiwar movement. For this minor heresy, Caitlin Johnstone was denied her right to respond on the site calling itself “the fearless voice of the left”.

On July 11, 2017, Yoav Litvin opened fire in an aggressive style that may have been fortified by his service in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Exclusion is a habit one can learn in the IDF. It’s ours, you have no right to be here, get out! That goes for the occupied left territories too. They decide who can stay and who does not belong.

In an interview last year, Litvin prided himself on adopting “the positive aspect of Zionism,” which is “the image of a Jew who is a fighter.” As a result of Jewish experience of persecution, he said, “We can lead a fight with all our brothers and sisters in minority communities.”

Fight against whom? In order to accomplish fundamental change, one needs to build majorities. Jews leading a fight of minorities will go where? Into the dead end of identity politics?

On July 28, *CounterPunch* published an even more contemptuous piece in the anti-Caitlin series: “Enough Nonsense! The Left Does Not Collaborate with Fascists”, by Eric Draitser. The Draitser rhetorical pose was to claim to prefer being water-boarded rather than having to write about Caitlin’s “doltish” prose, but felt obliged to do so in order to stop the advance of fascism.

Still, he does not easily tire from coming back to the subject.

As moderator of *CounterPunch* Radio, Draitser has promoted himself as the voice of CP and thus as a leading authority on what is or is not “left”. His role as mentor was demonstrated on his hour-long April 19, 2018 podcast with CP editors St. Clair and Joshua Frank. Draitser set the tone by elaborately ridiculing those who profess to be afraid of World War III. As if nuclear war were anything to worry about! What nonsense, he implied, getting all three to chortle contemptuously at the mention of Caitlin Johnstone, noted for such absurd concerns.

The Hilarity of World War III

Draitser dismissed the danger of World War III with his own original “class analysis”: since Russia and the United States are both ruled by oligarchs, they have too much in common to reasonably want to throw

nuclear missiles at each other. (In other words, what was precisely the Marxist view of imperialist war.) St. Clair hesitated at this, noting the prevalence of irrationality in high spheres. But Draitser dismissed this objection and forged ahead undisturbed, managing what he called a “fun conversation.”

The exclusionists are less concerned about war with Russia than about the failure of “the left” to be sufficiently critical of Russia – as if a shortage of Russophobia were a real problem these days. Shortly before the anti-Caitlin campaign, Litvin interviewed Draitser and their fellow anti-fascist watch dog, Portland State University geography instructor Alexander Reid Ross, who also publishes frequently on *CounterPunch*.

Draitser complained that: “You see a lot of leftist academics, intellectuals and activists who have in many ways abandoned a real class analysis in favor of a loosely defined politics of opposition. Within this mindset, everything that opposes the United States, Israel, the Saudis or the EU is automatically good and should be supported irrespective of its qualities.”

That simplistic dismissal of the antiwar “mindset” qualifies Draitser for his future place in mainstream media.

Ross’ Red-Brown Chaos

Reid Ross, went him one better. “I see a number of red-brown alliances forming today, particularly in the field of political geography. A number of far-right groups view the modern-day axis of Syria, Iran and Russia as a kind of international counterweight to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which has always been seen by fascist groups as a kind of nemesis led by the nations that defeated the Rome-Berlin axis in 1945.”

This is pure delirium. The nemesis that did the most to defeat the Rome-Berlin axis in 1945 was the Red Army. By conjuring up unidentified “far right groups”, Ross manages to identify Syria, Iran and Russia with the fascist Axis powers in World War II. In reality, NATO has been a magnet for attracting European fascists, from Italy, where they cooperated in clandestine “Gladio” operations to destroy the left, to Ukraine, where genuine fascists are in a “partnership for war” with NATO.

Most Americans have not been well educated in the complexities of modern history. In his Antifa hoodie, Ross can dazzle his audience with a plethora of unfamiliar facts strung together by extremely questionable analysis, unchallenged by genuine experts.

In the Litvin interview, both Draitser and Ross add their small bit to

prevailing Western Russophobia by dwelling on Putin's alleged support for European right-wing groups. Both stress the danger represented by Russian ambitions to establish a Eurasian empire, based on the ideology of Alexander Dugin.

Dugin is a religious reactionary, a tendency that may alarm Jews still haunted by Tsarist pogroms. They are also alarmed by Dugin's devotion to the thought of German philosopher Martin Heidegger, an ardent believer in Nazism and party member. This is ironic, since Heidegger has been the favorite of a whole line of post-World War II French philosophers, from Sartre to Foucault, considered to be "on the left". This merely shows that philosophy can be a source of great confusion.

In an *Intercept* [article](#) last September, Ross was quoted as saying that, "Assad is a figure that is central to a realization of Eurasionism," embodying the idea that, "Russia will lead the world out of a dark age of materialism and toward an ultranationalist rebirth of homogenous ethno-states federated under a heterogeneous spiritual empire."

It's hard to see what is so terrifying about such a vague aspiration, with so little chance of realization. But it does provide a new angle for condemning the Russian connection with Syria.

Ideological 'Iron Curtain'

Ross went so far on March 9 in his vituperations, that the Southern Poverty Law Center, which first published his [article](#) on its "Hate Watch" site, felt obliged to withdraw it. The title perfectly echoes the *QuerFront* accusation earlier leveled against *CounterPunch*: "The Multipolar Spin: how fascists operationalize left-wing resentment."

In this gem of guilt by association, Ross applied the "six degrees of separation" theory to show that people have been seen with the wrong people and thus must be red-brown. The long list of untouchables included Ray McGovern, Brian Becker, *Global Research*, Margaret Kimberly of *Black Agenda Report*, Daniel McAdams, "conspiracy theorist" Vanessa Beeley, and special focus on Max Blumenthal, guilty of having spoken favorably of a "multipolar world."

The main problem with "multipolarism", according to Ross, "may be that it supports not the emergence of Russia as a world power but the rise of the Kremlin's authoritarian conservative political ideology."

So, we may conclude, we need an ideological Iron Curtain to protect the "liberal leftist" West from Russian "authoritarian" conservatism.

Westernizes vs. Slavophiles

Russian relations with the West have historically been marked by ideological rivalry between Westernizers and Slavophiles. It is obvious that Dugin is no more than the latest prophet of Slavophilia, the idea that Christian Russia is a beacon of virtue to the world.

Historically, Westernizers in Russia have repeatedly gained influence and then lost out, because their overtures to the West were rebuffed on one pretext or another. (The British geopolitical tradition, based on the timeless dictum *divide et impera*, has traditionally favored policies to keep the continent divided) This merges easily with the Brzezinski doctrine of maintaining separation between Western Europe as a whole and Russia to maintain U.S. global hegemony.

Western rejection of Russia naturally favors a rise of the Slavophiles. It also obliges Russia to look to Eurasia rather than Western Europe. This is happening again.

Vladimir Putin is clearly in the Westernizing tradition. Not an ignorant buffoon like Yeltsin, ready to give away the shop to get a pat on the back from Bill. But rather someone who, as an intelligence agent (yes, KGB people learn a lot) lived in the West, spoke fluent German, and wanted Russia to have a dignified place in Europe – which was the dream of Gorbachev.

But this aspiration has been rudely rebuffed by the United States. Russians who yearned to be part of Europe have been disappointed, humiliated, and finally, angered. All their efforts at friendship have been met with increasingly outlandish portrayals of Russia as “the enemy”.

And yet despite everything, Putin persists in demonstrating his desire to work with Western partners, both by cutting back on military spending and again proposing to keep the pro-Western Dmitry Medvedev as Prime Minister.

If the West were really worried about Duginism, the remedy has always been obvious: improve relations with Putin.

Even Stalin did not really consider it Moscow’s job to convert Western Europe to communism, and it is certain that Putin has no illusion about converting his Western neighbors to Duginism. Russia is not out to change the West, but to make peace and do business, with whoever is willing.

The Russophobic exclusionists really constitute the ultra-left wing of the War Party, which uses different arguments to arrive at the same conclusions: Syria and Russia are enemies. They offer no practical solutions to any real problem,

but spread suspicion, distrust and enmity. They discredit the very idea of joining with Russia in peaceful mediation between Israel and Iran, for example. The real thrust of this odd campaign is to minimize the danger of war with Iran, or of direct confrontation with Russia, as Netanyahu continues to drag the United States and its European sidekicks deeper into Middle East wars on behalf of Israel's regional ambitions.

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Accusing Russia and Listening to History

Even recent history is conveniently forgotten when it comes to blaming Russia for just about everything, as Ted Snider comments.

By Ted Snider



The prophet Cassandra's curse was that when she told the future, no one listened. Many are cursed because they don't listen to history either.

The West has no shortage of charges it hurls against Russia, but most of them can be grouped into one of three categories: that Russia intervened in the American elections, that Russia is dragging the world into a new cold war, and that Russia is becoming increasingly aggressive and expansionist. Sometimes when charges are brought against you, the best witness you can call to your defense is history.

Election Intervention

This history of Russia, America and political intervention begins right at the beginning of the Soviet Union. But, it was not the Soviet Union doing the interfering.

The story of America and the West's interference in the birth of the Soviet Union is not well-known. It began with propaganda but metastasized well beyond words. By mid 1918, 13,000 American troops (as well as forces from Britain, France, Japan, Italy and other allies) were on Soviet soil. They would remain there for two years, killing and injuring thousands. Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev would later remind America of "the time you sent your troops to quell the revolution." Churchill would record for history that the West "shot Soviet Russians on sight," that they were "invaders on Russian soil," that "[t]hey armed the enemies of the Soviet government," that "[t]hey blockaded its ports, and sunk its battleships. They earnestly desired and schemed for its downfall."

America would interfere more specifically in Russian elections upon the death of the Soviet Union. In late 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin won a year of special powers from the Russian Parliament: for one year, he was to be, in effect, the dictator of Russia to facilitate the midwifery of the birth of a democratic Russia. In March of 1992, under pressure from a discontented population, parliament repealed the dictatorial powers it had granted him. Yeltsin responded by declaring a state of emergency, giving himself the repealed dictatorial powers. Russia's Constitutional Court ruled that Yeltsin was acting outside the constitution. But the US sided – against the Russian people and against the Russian Constitutional Court – with Yeltsin.

Intoxicated with American support, Yeltsin dissolved the parliament that had rescinded his powers and abolished the constitution of which he was in violation. In a 636-2 vote, the Russian parliament impeached Yeltsin. But President Bill Clinton again sided with Yeltsin against the Russian people and Russian law, giving him \$2.5 billion in aid. Clinton was interfering in the Russian people's choice of leaders.

Yeltsin took the money and sent police officers and elite paratroopers to surround the parliament building. Clinton "praised the Russian President has (sic) having done 'quite well' in managing the standoff with the Russian Parliament," as *The New York Times* reported at the time. Clinton added that he thought "the United States and the free world ought to hang in there" with their support of Yeltsin against his people, their constitution and their courts, and judged Yeltsin to be "on the right side of history."

On the right side of history and armed with machine guns, Yeltsin's troops opened fire on the crowd of protesters, killing about 100 people before setting the Russian parliament building on fire. By the time the day was over, Yeltsin's troops had killed an unconfirmed 500 people and wounded nearly 1,000. Still, Clinton stood with Yeltsin. He provided ludicrous cover for Yeltsin's massacre,

claiming that "I don't see that he had any choice... If such a thing happened in the United States, you would have expected me to take tough action against it." Clinton's secretary of state, Warren Christopher, said that the US supported Yeltsin's suspension of parliament in these "extraordinary times."

In 1996, America would interfere yet again. With elections looming, Yeltsin's popularity was nonexistent, and his approval rating was at about 6 percent. According to Professor Emeritus of Russian Studies at Princeton, Stephen Cohen, Clinton's interference in Russian politics, his "crusade" to "reform Russia," had by now become official policy. And, so, America boldly interfered directly in Russian elections. Three American political consultants, receiving "direct assistance from Bill Clinton's White House," secretly ran Yeltsin's re-election campaign. As Time magazine broke the story, "For four months, a group of American political consultants clandestinely participated in guiding Yeltsin's campaign."

"Funded by the U.S. government," Cohen reports, Americans "gave money to favored Russian politicians, instructed ministers, drafted legislation and presidential decrees, underwrote textbooks, and served at Yeltsin's reelection headquarters in 1996."

More incriminating is that Richard Dresner, one of the three American consultants, maintained a direct line to Clinton's Chief Strategist, Dick Morris. According to reporting by Sean Guillory, in his book, *Behind the Oval Office*, Morris says that, with Clinton's approval, he received weekly briefings from Dresner that he would give to Clinton. Based on those briefings, Clinton would then provide recommendations to Dresner through Morris.

Then ambassador to Russia Thomas Pickering even pressured an opposing candidate to drop out of the election to improve Yeltsin's odds of winning.

The US not only helped run Yeltsin's campaign, they helped pay for it. The US backed a \$10.2 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan for Russia, the second-biggest loan the IMF had ever given. The New York Times reported that the loan was "expected to be helpful to President Boris N. Yeltsin in the presidential election in June." The *Times* explained that the loan was "a vote of confidence" for Yeltsin who "has been lagging well behind ... in opinion polls" and added that the US Treasury Secretary "welcomed the fund's decision."

Yeltsin won the election by 13 percent, and *Time* magazine's cover declared: "Yanks to the rescue: The secret story of how American advisers helped Yeltsin win".

Cohen reports that the US ambassador to Russia boasted that "without our

leadership ... we would see a considerably different Russia today.” That’s a confession of election interference.

Fifteen years later, Russia would accuse America of meddling still. When protests broke out over flawed parliamentary elections in December 2011, Putin said that Hillary Clinton “set the tone for some actors in our country and gave them a signal.” He accused the State Department of supporting the protesters. The accusation could be dismissed if the State Department hadn’t declared its intention to “establish a direct relationship with the Russian people over the Kremlin’s head.”

A New Cold War

Western political discourse and Western media constantly repeat the charge that Russia is pulling the world back into the Cold War. But it was actually the US that put the Cold War on life support when Russia wanted to let it go. In his new book *Russia Against the Rest*, Richard Sakwa, Russia expert and Professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent, argues that, at the close of the Cold War, Russia wanted to transcend the blocs and divisions, but America insisted on preserving them. Russia wanted to join a transformed international community freed of blocs and made up of equal partners who cooperated with each other; America offered Russia only an invitation to join an enlarged American-led community as a defeated and subordinate member.

Gorbachev offered the world Russia, but Bush could still only see the Soviet Union. But Gorbachev had brought about what Sakwa calls a “self-willed disintegration of the Soviet bloc” in favor of ending the Cold War. Sakwa says that “it was not Western pressure that forced the Soviet leadership to end the Cold War but a decision of the Soviet leadership . . . that accepted the possibility of a stable and enduring cooperative relationship”

Gorbachev’s vision preceded the end of the Cold War: it was not a concession that came after. It was the Soviet Union, and not the United States, that ended the Cold War. James Matlock, the US ambassador to the Soviet Union at the time, complains that American politicians were only able to see “the end of the Cold War as if it were a quasi-military victory rather than a negotiated outcome that benefited both sides.” Matlock tried to remind the West that “it was Gorbachev’s initiatives and not Western military pressure that ‘defeated communism’.”

Cohen argued that Gorbachev ended the Cold War “well before the disintegration of the Soviet Union.” But the US was unable to recognize the Soviet invitation and refused to reciprocate: “The Cold War [had] ended in Moscow,” Cohen says, “but not in Washington.” It was the West, and not Russia, that resumed the Cold War after disintegration of the Soviet Union. The Warsaw Pact voluntarily

dissolved on March 31, 1991. NATO never did.

As recently as 2000, Putin was still answering the question of whether Russia would join NATO with, "Why not?" He saw Russia as part of a transformed community where Russia was "part of European culture . . . part of the 'civilized world,'" where "seeing NATO as an enemy is destructive for Russia." Sakwa says that in the early 2000s, Putin seriously entered into informal talks about NATO membership until the US vetoed the idea.

Sakwa says that Putin continued to engage the West and to attempt to forge a post Cold War partnership. Immediately after 9/11, Putin offered America logistical and intelligence support and helped take out the Taliban. Sakwa quotes an American official who rated Russian support after 9/11 as "as important as that of any NATO ally." Rather than taking the hand Russia was offering in partnership, America slapped it by pulling out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and announcing that it would now welcome the Baltic States into NATO.

Despite Russian attempts to integrate Europe and the international community into a world order that transcended Cold War divisions, pacts and rivalries, Europe and the West continued to maintain and expand those divisions. 2008 saw the creation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Sakwa explains that the aim of the EaP was to draw Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia into the Western sphere. WikiLeaks has exposed a US cable that confesses that the aim of the EaP was to "counter Russia's influence in Eastern Europe," and admits to looking "for ways to enhance western influence beyond NATO's eastern border." Russia was trying to end, to transcend, the Cold War; America kept trying to push it.

Gorbachev and Putin always hoped the West would reciprocate Moscow's voluntary dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact and the ending of the Cold War. George Keenan, the American diplomat and father of the "policy of containment" of the Soviet Union, mourned the missed opportunity in a 1998 interview: "Don't people understand? Our differences in the cold war were with the Soviet Communist regime. And now we are turning our backs on the very people who mounted the greatest bloodless revolution in history to remove that Soviet regime."

When Gorbachev dissolved the Soviet Union, he hoped to dissolve it into a transformed world that was no longer separated into rival blocs. It was Washington and the West that lacked the vision to leave the Cold War behind and that continuously failed to seize that transformative vision because they were ossified in a Cold War way of seeing the world.

Aggression and Expansionism

Russian interventions, especially in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, have repeatedly been offered as evidence of the Western charge that Putin's Russia is becoming increasingly aggressive and expansionist. But Russia's interventions have never been expressions of policy. Instead, they have been isolated responses to a larger systemic Western policy of expansionism.

The West wasn't supposed to expand. At a February 9, 1990 meeting, George H.W. Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker, promised Gorbachev that if NATO got Germany and Russia to pull its troops out of East Germany "there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction one inch to the east." But according to Sakwa, this promise meant only that NATO would not spill over from West Germany into East Germany. The promise of not "one inch to the east," meant only that NATO wouldn't militarize East Germany.

The question of militarizing east of a unified Germany never had to explicitly come up: it was implicitly understood. Sakwa says that "It was clear that [the promise] did not refer just to the former German Democratic Republic."

The promise was made on two consecutive days: first by the Americans and then by West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. According to West German foreign ministry documents, on February 10, 1990, the day after Baker's promise, West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher told his Soviet counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze, "'For us . . . one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east.' And because the conversation revolved mainly around East Germany, Genscher added explicitly: 'As far as the non-expansion of NATO is concerned, this also applies in general.'"

Ray McGovern, a former CIA analyst and chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch, reports that the US ambassador to the USSR at the time of the promise, Jack Matlock – who was present at the talks – told him: "The language used was absolute, and the entire negotiation was in the framework of a general agreement that there would be no use of force by the Soviets and no 'taking advantage' by the US ... I don't see how anybody could view the subsequent expansion of NATO as anything but 'taking advantage. . .'"

Gorbachev certainly thinks there was a promise made. He says it was made not to expand NATO "as much as a thumb's width further to the east." Putin also says the promise was made. Putin has asked, "And what happened to the assurances our Western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them."

Putin pointed out that the existence of the NATO promise is not just his and

Gorbachev's perception. It was also the view of the NATO general secretary at the time: "I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr. [Manfred] Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990," Putin noted. "He said at the time that: 'the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee.' Where are those guarantees?"

Recent scholarship supports the Russian version of the story. Sakwa says that "studies demonstrate that the commitment not to enlarge NATO covered the whole former Soviet bloc and not just East Germany."

The promise made to Gorbachev was shattered: NATO engulfed Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1999; Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia in 2004 and Albania and Croatia in 2009. It was the West, and not Russia, that was being expansionist.

Georgia Attacks

When, in 2008, NATO promised Georgia and Ukraine eventual membership, Russia perceived the threat of NATO encroaching right to its borders. It is in Georgia and Ukraine that Russia felt it had to draw the line with NATO encroachment into its core sphere of influence.

Sakwa says that the war in Georgia was "the first war to stop NATO enlargement; Ukraine was the second." The Georgian war was less an example of Russian expansionism than a defense against Western expansionism. And, even in the attempt to stop Western expansionism, Russia was not the initiator of aggression.

When Georgia declared independence from Russia in 1991, South Ossetia sought independence from Georgia. In August 2008, separatists responded to the massing of Georgian troops on the border of South Ossetia by attacking. Hours after a cease fire had been declared, Georgia launched a surprise attack on the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali. An estimated 160 South Ossetians were killed in the attack, as were 48 Russian soldiers.

Sakwa says that Russian forces arrived and defeated the Georgian army "in response to the Georgian bombardment of Tskhinvali." Fifteen Russian peacekeepers were killed. The EU's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, headed by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini condemned the Georgian attack: "None of the explanations given by the Georgian authorities in order to provide some form of legal justification for the attack" were legitimate. Nor, she found, was the bombardment "necessary and proportionate." She concluded that, though, the conflict had long been simmering, the "full-scale" hostilities

were started by Georgia.

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe observers saw no evidence that South Ossetia attacked Georgia before Georgia attacked Tskhinvali in violation of the cease fire.

A Coup in Ukraine

Ukraine was the second Russian intervention to stop NATO enlargement and encroachment. The catalyst seized upon for the US-backed coup in Ukraine was elected President Viktor Yanukovich's abandonment of an economic alliance with the European Union in favor of an economic alliance with Russia.

But, the economic alliance with the EU was not the benign one presented to the Western public. It was not just an economic offer. According to Cohen, the EU proposal also "included 'security policy' provisions . . . that would apparently subordinate Ukraine to NATO." The provisions compelled Ukraine to "adhere to Europe's 'military and security' policies." So, the proposal was not a benign economic agreement: it was a security threat to Russia in economic sheep's clothing.

Russia had no problem with EU expansion. Sakwa says that "there was no external resistance at this point to EU enlargement. On its own it posed no security threat to Russia, and it was only later, when allied with NATO enlargement . . . that enlargement encountered resistance." And that is why the EU offer to Ukraine is an example of Western expansionism: it was allied with NATO.

Sakwa says "EU enlargement paves the way to NATO membership" and points out that, since 1989, every new member of the EU has become a member of NATO. It's not only that the EU package subordinated Ukraine to NATO, since the EU Treaty of Lisbon went into effect in 2009 all new members of the EU are required to align their defense and security policies with NATO.

The EU's Association Agreement with Ukraine was no simple economic agreement. Article 4 says the Agreement will "promote gradual convergence on foreign and security matters with the aim of Ukraine's ever-deeper involvement in the European security area." Article 7 speaks of the convergence of security and defense, and Article 10 says that "the parties shall explore the potential of military and technological cooperation."

So, the annexation of Crimea, after it was overwhelmingly approved in a popular referendum, was not part of a larger, consistent policy of Russian expansionism. It was a defensive reaction to Western encroachment deep into its sphere of influence and right up to its borders. It was a specific response to a threat,

not a hunger for expansion. It was a specific response that Russia felt was forced upon it by a Western coup that was intended to escort Ukraine out of the Russian sphere of influence and into an expanded NATO that stretched right to Russia's door step.

The two cases offered by the West in evidence of its claim that Russia is increasingly aggressive and expansionist were really specific defensive responses forced on Russia by Western expansionism that had taken earlier NATO expansionism too far. Charges that Russia "invaded" Ukraine have never be backed by evidence. According to German intelligence, the accusation was largely fabricated.

Like the charges against Russia of election interference and aggressive expansionism, both lack evidence. The charge of inciting a new cold war requires a blinding dose of hypocrisy and a strong case of historical amnesia. The witness that gives the defense the best chance of answering the charges is history itself. But, only if we listen.

A version of this commentary was originally published at Antiwar.com.

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The MSM's Anti-Russia Bias

The U.S. mainstream media (MSM) presents itself as the arbiter of truth-telling and journalistic professionalism – the global gold standard – but its deep-seated biases, especially on Russia, belie that self-image, notes William Blum.

By William Blum

The anti-Russian/anti-Soviet bias in the American media appears to have no limit. You would think that they would have enough self-awareness and enough journalistic integrity -- just enough -- to be concerned about their image. But it keeps on coming, piled higher and deeper.

One of the latest cases in point is a review of a new biography of Mikhail Gorbachev in the *New York Times Book Review* (September 10). The review says that Gorbachev "was no hero to his own people" because he was "the destroyer of their empire."

This is how the *New York Times* avoids having to say anything positive about life

in the Soviet Union or about socialism. They would have readers believe that it was the loss of the likes of Czechoslovakia or Hungary et al. that upset the Russian people, not the loss, under Gorbachev's *perestroika*, of a decent standard of living for all, a loss affecting people's rent, employment, vacations, medical care, education, and many other aspects of the Soviet welfare state.

Accompanying this review is a quote from a 1996 *Times* review of Gorbachev's own memoir, which said: "It mystifies Westerners that Mikhail Gorbachev is loathed and ridiculed in his own country. This is the man who pulled the world several steps back from the nuclear brink and lifted a crushing fear from his countrymen, who ended bloody foreign adventures [and] liberated Eastern Europe. ... Yet his repudiation at home could hardly be more complete. His political comeback attempt in June attracted less than 1 percent of the vote."

Thus is Gorbachev's unpopularity with his own people further relegated to the category of "mystery", and not due to the profound social changes.

It should be noted that in 1999, *USA Today* reported: "When the Berlin Wall crumbled [1989], East Germans imagined a life of freedom where consumer goods were abundant and hardships would fade. Ten years later, a remarkable 51% say they were happier with communism." [*USA Today*, October 11, 1999, p.1]

Earlier polls would likely have shown even more than 51% expressing such a sentiment, for in the ten years many of those who remembered life in East Germany with some fondness had passed away; although even 10 years later, in 2009, the *Washington Post* could report: "Westerners [West Berliners] say they are fed up with the tendency of their eastern counterparts to wax nostalgic about communist times." [*Washington Post*, May 12, 2009; see a similar story November 5, 2009]

It was in the post-unification period that a new Russian and Eastern Europe proverb was born: "Everything the Communists said about Communism was a lie, but everything they said about capitalism turned out to be the truth."

The current *New York Times* review twice refers to Vladimir Putin as "authoritarian", as does, routinely, much of the Western media. None of the many such references I have come across in recent years has given an example of such authoritarian policies, although such examples of course exist, as they do under a man named Trump and a woman named May and every other government in the world. But clearly if a strong case could be made of Putin being authoritarian, the Western media would routinely document such in their attacks upon the Russian president. Why do they not?

Double Standards

The review further refers to Putin to as “the cold-eye former K.G.B. lieutenant colonel”. One has to wonder if the *New York Times* has ever referred to President George H.W. Bush as “the cold-eye former CIA Director.”

Just as in the first Cold War, one of the basic problems is that Americans have great difficulty in believing that Russians mean well. Apropos this, I’d like to recall the following written about George Kennan, one of the most prominent American diplomats ever:

Crossing Poland with the first US diplomatic mission to the Soviet Union in the winter of 1933, a young American diplomat named George Kennan was somewhat astonished to hear the Soviet escort, Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov, reminisce about growing up in a village nearby, about the books he had read and his dreams as a small boy of being a librarian.

“We suddenly realized, or at least I did, that these people we were dealing with were human beings like ourselves,” Kennan wrote, “that they had been born somewhere, that they had their childhood ambitions as we had. It seemed for a brief moment we could break through and embrace these people.” [Walter Isaacson & Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men* (1986), p.158]

It hasn’t happened yet.

Kennan’s sudden realization brings George Orwell to mind: “We have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.”

William Blum is an author, historian, and renowned critic of U.S. foreign policy. He is the author of *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* and *Rogue State: A Guide to the World’s Only Superpower*, among others. [This article originally appeared at the Anti-Empire Report, <https://williamblum.org/aer/read/151> .]

Gorbachev Warns of Growing Danger

A group of Americans visiting Russia heard dire warnings from ex-Soviet President Gorbachev that the tensions between the U.S. and Russia are creating a dangerous situation for the world, reports Rick Sterling, who is on the trip.

By Rick Sterling

The former President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, is 87 years old but still sharp. He told a delegation of 30 Americans in a two-week visit to Russia organized by the Center for Citizen Initiatives, "This is a time to be concerned. We should worry about relations between our two countries. ... Things cannot continue as they are."

President Gorbachev recalled his initial meetings with President Reagan, which came after six years of poor relations and hostility. In the first summit meeting, Reagan issued a long list of accusations against the Soviet Union; Gorbachev responded with his own accusations against the U.S. After that meeting Gorbachev said "He's not a hawk; he's a dinosaur" while Reagan said about Gorbachev "He's a die-hard communist."

At the next summit meeting, Reagan continued lecturing Gorbachev. After listening for 15 minutes. Gorbachev stopped Reagan saying, "That's enough. If you want to talk as equals we can go very far. Differences can be bridged. Problems can be resolved. But as equals."

Reagan asked how the Soviet Union would respond if the United States was at risk because of some kind of natural calamity. When Gorbachev said his people would want to help, not take advantage, the mood changed.

Gorbachev recalled his own friendly experience talking with average Americans. He suggested that perhaps the U.S. needs its own perestroika. He reminded us that it was President John F Kennedy who said "We need peace but not a Pax Americana not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women."

Gorbachev continued saying, "The current situation is not right. We need to change that. Let us stop provoking each other. Let us stop trying to tear up other countries. ... Our two countries are still central to world peace. We need peace in order to resolve other world problems. One percent of the world controls 90 percent of the wealth. The ruling class is happy with this but things cannot continue as they are. ... Budgets smell of gunpowder. ... Fear is being cultivated. This is resulting in a new arms race."

Gorbachev asked, "Does the USA want Russia to just submit?" Referring to Russia's history with invasions by France in the early 1800s and Germany in the 1940s, he explained "This is a country that can never submit... There will be no winners in a nuclear war."

The Ukraine Crisis

The 30-member delegation has been having informative meetings with numerous people to gain a better understanding of modern Russia and its relations with the United States and the world. Another especially interesting meeting was held

with Vladimir Kozin, member of the Russian Academy of Military Science.

Vladimir Kozin is an arms control specialist and member of the Russian Academy of Military Science who has worked on arms control issues since the 1970s. Kozin says that Russians see themselves being encircled by NATO. Of the 16 countries bordering Russia, eight have anti-Russia sentiments. He notes that the U.S. military budget is 12 times greater than that of Russia and increasing.

Kozin said it is a “fairy tale” that Russia interfered in the U.S. election. What is NOT a fairy tale, he said, is that the U.S. has spent a huge amount of money to influence Russian elections in the past and funded 400 Non-Governmental Organizations (or NGOs), which were part of the destabilization campaign in Ukraine leading to the 2014 coup.

Regarding key conflict points emerging from the Ukraine crisis, Kozin noted that Crimea was part of Russia since 1783. He added that despite the presence of 16,000 Russian troops (who were in Crimea as part of the Sevastopol naval base agreement) and 18,000 Ukrainian troops, the Crimea plebiscite to re-unify with Russia was handled without violence, with huge turnout and overwhelming vote in favor.

As for hostilities in eastern Ukraine, Kozin asked why this fighting has happened just because the largely ethnic Russian population resisted the overthrow of elected President Viktor Yanukovich and demanded some form of autonomy from Kiev.

If Scotland can consider secession from the United Kingdom and Catalonia from Spain, he argued, what’s wrong with Donbass (eastern Ukraine) wanting more autonomy within Ukraine? Why has Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko turned to military conflict instead of negotiating with the dissidents in eastern Ukraine?

Kozin believes it is vital to have an arms control summit meeting between Presidents Trump and Putin. He thinks we should work toward the complete elimination of nuclear weapons by 2045. In the meantime, the easiest way to reduce tension and the risk of war would be an agreement on “No First Use of Nuclear Weapons,” he said.

In a sober assessment of Trump’s first 100 days as President, Kozin concluded, “Aggravating these facts of life is the deep degree of mistrust between Washington and Moscow, which the Americans spawned and have continued to nurse. A vicious circle has emerged in the interrelationship between weapons and trust ... Clearly such an irrational phenomenon cannot go on indefinitely.”

From both Kozin and Gorbachev the message was clear: We need to do something to restore discussion and stop the slide toward ever greater tension and danger.

Rick Sterling is an investigative journalist who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. He can be contacted at rsterling1@gmail.com

Can the World Avert a New Cold War?

The West is charging off into a new Cold War with Russia under banners of hypocrisy, from charges of “expansionism” to complaints about disrespect for individual rights. This lack of balance could have grave consequences for the world, says former British intelligence officer Annie Machon.

By Annie Machon

Last weekend, I was invited onto RT to do [an interview](#) about the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, particularly focusing on the speech delivered by the last Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, during his visit to Berlin.

I would like to expand on some of the topics I mentioned, how to encapsulate an alternative geopolitical perspective different from the Western orthodoxy in under four minutes? A task even [Monty Python](#) would find challenging!

The first issue was Gorbachev’s recent comments about the dangers of a new Cold War arising around the crisis in Ukraine. Though there are a variety of geopolitical factors involved in these new East-West tensions, the front line of this new Cold War remains the Internet, which emerged in the 1990s after the original Cold War ended – as an outlet for political diversity circumventing the traditional gatekeepers for information.

In the 1990s, the United States had a golden opportunity, in fact a perfect storm of opportunities to assert its global hegemony. It was the last superpower left standing in a newly unipolar world, [history had supposedly ended](#) and capitalism had triumphed. The Soviet Union had disintegrated and the newly shorn Russia was tottering, its vast national wealth being assiduously asset-stripped by the [globalized neocon Ã©lite](#) and its economic “shock therapy.”

Simultaneously, the new World Wide Web was exponentially growing and the key pioneers were predominantly American companies. After a panicked phase of playing catch-up to the Internet’s exhilarating burst of democratization, Western spy agencies saw the potential for [total mastery of the Internet](#), creating a surveillance panopticon, a single location from which a watchman can observe all inmates of an institution without them knowing they are being

watched. In this case, the institution was the entire planet and the inmates were the world's people. It was an opportunity that the KGB or the Stasi could only have fantasized about. Thanks to Edward Snowden, we are now beginning to get glimpses of the full horror of the surveillance under which we all now live.

Building on the old Echelon model, which was so nearly overthrown in Europe back in July 2001, the National Security Agency suborned, bought and prostituted other intelligence agencies across Europe to do its bidding. Germany, at the nexus of east and west Europe, remains a front line in this battle, with the BND possibly working unconstitutionally to do the NSA's bidding, even apparently to the detriment of its own national interest. Some politicians and many hacktivists are fighting back.

Reneging on a Deal

But it is the geographical boundaries that have shifted most significantly since the fall of the Wall. Here I need to credit Ray McGovern, a former senior CIA officer and now a peace activist, for all the useful information he provided during his various talks and interviews across Europe a couple of months ago.

McGovern, a fluent Russian speaker, worked as a Soviet expert for much of his career in the CIA. As such he was privy to the behind-the-scenes negotiating that occurred after the fall of the Wall when the United States pushed for German reunification but was worried about the 260,000 Soviet troops stationed in the former East Germany. So, a deal was cut with Gorbachev, stating that NATO would not move "one inch" further than Germany after reunification. The Soviets accepted this arrangement and withdrew their troops.

Well, we all know what has happened since. Though its principal *raison d'être* to counter the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991, NATO expanded east at an amazing rate, now encompassing a further 12 eastern European countries including the Baltic States and Poland, which the U.S. has used as a base for an increasing number of "defensive" missile systems. In 2008, NATO also issued a declaration that Georgia and Ukraine would be welcome to join, taking the front line up to the borders of Russia. Coincidentally, both these countries in recent years have been portrayed as the victims of "Russian expansionism."

In 2008, Georgia invaded the disputed ethnic Russian region of South Ossetia. Russia moved to protect the people and gave the Georgian military a bloody nose. Anyone remember that? At the time it was portrayed across the Western media as Russian aggression, but the facts have emerged since to disprove this version of events.

Similarly, this year we have seen a violent coup overthrow democratically-

elected President Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine when he was inclined to stay within the Russian sphere of influence rather than ally the country more closely to the European Union under the asset-stripping austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

Victoria Nuland, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State responsible for Europe, explained in one speech late last year that the United States had spent \$5 billion in support of Ukraine's "European aspirations" and then before the Feb. 22 coup she was overheard in a phone conversation with the U.S. ambassador in Kiev picking who should serve in the new government, saying "Fuck the EU" and declaring that Arseniy Yatsenyuk "Yats is the guy" should take over. After the coup, Yatsenyuk emerged as the new prime minister and then pushed through the IMF plan.

And yet still Russia is blamed for aggression. I am not an apologist for Russia, but the facts speak for themselves even if they are not widely reported in the Western mainstream media.

Why the Meddling?

But why on earth would the U.S. be meddling in Ukraine? Would an expansion of NATO be sufficient excuse in America's self-interested eyes? Probably not.

Which leads me on to a very interesting article by Eric Zuesse. The argument of his well-researched report is that it all comes down to energy supplies once again. When does it not?

The United States has some unsavory allies in the Middle East, including theocratic dictatorships such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Their vast energy reserves are not only essential to the United States, but also the trading of these reserves in the petrodollar monopoly is vital to propping up the fragile U.S. economy.

Russia, at the moment, is the primary energy supplier to the EU, the world's largest market. Iran, which has strengthened its ties to Russia, wanted to build a pipeline via Syria with President Bashar al-Assad's approval, to exploit this vast market. However, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United States apparently have other plans involving a pipeline from Qatar via Syria to Europe.

Hence the urgent need to overthrow Assad and put a Sunni puppet government in place, more susceptible to those pulling the strings. Qatar's preferred candidate of choice would be more moderate, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, would have no compunction about installing a hardline fundamentalist régime in place, up to and including ISIS or al-Qaeda's affiliate, the Nusra Front. Thus the murder, mayhem and human suffering

erupting across the region now.

Though the mainstream media presents the Syrian civil war to the U.S. and EU people as a noble struggle of “moderates” to oust evil dictator Assad, it is really an appalling real-life example of the horrors inherent in Zbigniew Brzezinski’s psychopathic “grand chessboard.”

King Dollar

It is a widely accepted understanding today, over a decade after the “war on terror” began, that all the wars in the Middle East were launched to protect America’s oil and energy interests. Less well known is the country’s desperate scramble to protect the petro-dollar monopoly, the denomination of oil sales in U.S. dollars. If that ends if some alternative currency or basket of currencies supplants the U.S. dollar the dollar will no longer remain the world’s reserve currency and the United States will be financially screwed.

If you look at all the recent wars, invasions and “humanitarian interventions” that have resulted in collapsed countries and anarchy across whole regions, it is clear that beyond oil and gas the key issue is money.

Pre-2003 Iraq tried to trade what oil it could in euros not dollars and Saddam Hussein was deposed and killed; Libya was welcomed briefly back into the international fold, but once Colonel Muammar Gaddafi began to talk about establishing an African gold dinar currency, backed by Libya’s oil wealth to challenge the petro-dollar, he too was toppled and killed; Assad wanted to facilitate energy pipelines to Europe for Russia and Iran, and he was attacked; even Iran tried to trade its energy reserves in euros, and lo and behold it was almost bombed in 2008; and finally Russia itself trades some of its energy in rubles and faces NATO expansion onto its borders, economic sanctions and the prospects of a new Cold War.

As people say, always follow the money.

So, in my view, this is the current geopolitical situation: Russia is now strong enough – with its domination of Europe’s energy supply, its backing by some Middle Eastern countries that want to break away from the U.S. sphere of influence, and its trade deals and establishment of an independent global investment development bank with other BRICS countries – that it can challenge the U.S. hegemony.

However, threaten the petro-dollar monopoly and thereby the financial solvency of the United States of America and you are suddenly Public Enemy No 1.

As I said, I am by no means an apologist for Russia. I tell it like I see it. To

Western sensibilities, Russia has some serious domestic issues to address: human rights abuses during the brutal Chechen war; its suspected involvement in the death by polonium-210 poisoning of KGB defector Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006; its overly punitive drug laws; and human rights abuses against dissidents, the LGBT community and journalists. Yet the West has merely mouthed platitudinous objections to all these issues and clearly does not have clean hands on similar troubling issues of its own.

So why now is Russia being internationally excoriated and penalized for its reaction to what was clearly an unconstitutional coup in Ukraine followed by a punitive campaign of repression by the new Kiev regime against ethnic Russians in Ukraine's south and east? Over the last few years, Russia has looked statesmanlike compared to the U.S. and its vassal states: it was not involved with the Libya fiasco; it has given safe haven to NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden; and it halted the rush to yet another disastrous western war in Syria.

Nor, to my West European sensibilities, are America and its acolytes pristine either, with their mass surveillance, presidentially approved kill lists, illegal wars, kidnapping, torture and drone bombings. Not to mention the U.S. domestic addiction to gun ownership, vast prison populations, draconian drug sentences and the death penalty, but that's another story.

Yet the U.S. media-enabled propaganda machines justify all of the above and demonize Russia for reacting to geopolitical provocations on its own border thus creating yet another fresh bogeyman to justify yet more "defense" spending.

A Patient Bear

The Russian bear is being baited, increasingly surrounded by yapping curs. I thought this sport had been made illegal hundreds of years ago, at least in Europe, but obviously not in the dirty realm of international politics. It is a marvel that the bear has not lashed out more in the face of such provocation.

There was a chance for peace when the Berlin Wall came down 25 years ago. If the United States had upheld its side of the gentlemen's agreement about not expanding NATO, if the neocon "shock therapy" predators had not pounced on a weakened post-Soviet Russia, and if closer integration could have been achieved with Europe, the future could have been rosy.

Unfortunately, I have to agree with Gorbachev, we are indeed facing a new Cold War, and this time it is clearly of America's making. But Europe will bear the brunt, through trade sanctions, energy shortages and even, potentially, war. It is time we Europeans broke away from our American vassalage and looked to our own future.

Annie Machon is a former intelligence officer in the UK's MI5 Security Service (the U.S. counterpart is the FBI). She is also a British member of Sam Adams Associates for Integrity in Intelligence.

How NATO Jabs Russia on Ukraine

Exclusive: The U.S. mainstream media portrays the Ukraine crisis as a case of Russian “imperialism,” but the reality is that Moscow has been reacting to aggressive moves by Washington to expand NATO to Russia’s border in violation of a post-Cold War pledge, writes ex-CIA analyst Ray McGovern.

By Ray McGovern

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov used Wednesday’s interview with Bloomberg News to address the overriding issue regarding the future of Ukraine, at least from Moscow’s perspective. Speaking in fluent English, he said Russia would be “categorically against” Ukraine joining NATO.

Lavrov said he welcomed the interviewer’s question regarding whether Ukraine can be part of NATO, recognizing it as a chance to shoehorn background information into the interview. It was an opportunity to explain Moscow’s position to a wide English-speaking international audience first and foremost Americans. His comments seemed partly aimed at those so malnourished on “mainstream media” that they might be learning the history of NATO enlargement for the first time. Lavrov said:

“In my view, it all started ... back in the 1990s, when in spite of all the pronouncements about how the Cold War was over and that there should be no winners yet, NATO looked upon itself as a winner.”

Lavrov said U.S. and NATO reneged on a series of commitments: not to enlarge the Alliance; then (after NATO was expanded contrary to that commitment), not to deploy substantial forces on the territories of new NATO members; and then not to move NATO infrastructure to the Russian border.

“All these commitments have been, to one degree or another, violated,” said Lavrov, adding that “attempts to draw Ukraine into NATO would have a negative impact on the entire system of European security.” Lavrov said Russia’s national security interests and 25 years of recent history make this a key problem, not only for Ukraine and NATO, but also “an issue of Russia.”

Is Lavrov distorting the history? The answer is important the more so inasmuch

as the information needed to form cogent judgments is rarely found in the U.S. "mainstream media." What happened in the months immediately before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall on Nov. 9/10, 1989, is key to understanding Russia's attitude now.

No Dancing

To his credit, President George H. W. Bush sent a reassuring message to the Soviets, saying, "I will not dance on the Berlin wall." And just three weeks after it fell, Bush flew to Malta for a two-day summit with Gorbachev.

At a joint press conference on Dec. 3, 1989, Gorbachev said, "We are at the beginning of a long road to a lasting, peaceful era. The threat of force, mistrust, psychological and ideological struggle should all be things of the past."

In the same vein, Bush spoke of a new future just begun "right here in Malta" one of lasting peace and enduring East-West cooperation. This came just six months after Bush had publicly called in a major speech in Mainz, West Germany, for "a Europe whole and free." At the time it did not seem one had to be Pollyanna to hope that flesh could be pinned to the bones of that rhetoric.

According to Jack Matlock, then-U.S. ambassador to the U.S.S.R. who took part in the Malta summit, the most basic agreement involved (1) Gorbachev's pledge not to use force in Eastern Europe where the Russians had 24 divisions (some 350,000 troops) in East Germany alone, and (2) Bush's promise not to "take advantage" of a Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe.

In early February 1990, Bush sent Secretary of State James Baker to work out the all-important details directly with Gorbachev and Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Ambassador Matlock again was there and took careful notes on the negotiations, which focused on German reunification.

From memory, Matlock told me that Baker tried to convince Gorbachev that it was in Moscow's interest to let a united Germany remain in NATO. Matlock recalled that Baker began his argument saying something like, "**Assuming there is no expansion of NATO jurisdiction to the East, not one inch**, what would you prefer, a Germany embedded in NATO, or one that can go independently in any direction it chooses." [emphasis added]

The implication was that Germany might just opt to acquire nuclear weapons, were it not anchored in NATO. Gorbachev answered that he took Baker's argument seriously, and wasted little time in agreeing to the deal.

Ambassador Matlock, one of the most widely respected experts on Russia, told me

“the language used was absolute, and the entire negotiation was in the framework of a general agreement that there would be no use of force by the Soviets and no ‘taking advantage’ by the U.S.”

He added, “I don’t see how anybody could view the subsequent expansion of NATO as anything but ‘taking advantage,’ particularly since, by then, the U.S.S.R. was no more and Russia was hardly a credible threat.”

In his book *Superpower Illusions*, Matlock wrote that NATO enlargement was a function of U.S. domestic politics not of foreign policy strategic thinking. It seems he got that right, too.

Tough Guy Clinton

From the campaign trail on Oct. 22, 1996, two weeks before he defeated Bob Dole for a second term as president, Bill Clinton used NATO enlargement to advertise his assertiveness in foreign policy and America’s status as the “world’s indispensable nation.” Clinton bragged about proposing NATO enlargement at his first NATO summit in 1994, saying it “should enlarge steadily, deliberately, openly.” He never explained why.

President Clinton, thus, reneged on the pledges made by Baker to Gorbachev and Shevardnadze. Clinton lamely called upon Russia to view NATO’s enlargement as an arrangement that will “advance the security of everyone.”

Clinton’s tough-guy-ism toward Russia was, in part, a response to even more aggressive NATO plans from Clinton’s Republican opponent Bob Dole, who had been calling for incorporating Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary as full members of NATO and had accused Clinton of “dragging his feet” on this. Clinton was not about to be out-toughed.

Those three countries joined NATO in 1999, starting a trend. By April 2009, nine more countries became members, bringing the post-Cold War additions to 12 equal to the number of the original 12 NATO states.

Clinton made what quintessential Russian specialist Ambassador George Kennan called a “fateful error.” Writing in the New York Times on Feb. 5, 1997, Kennan asserted: “Expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era.”

“Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly

not to our liking.”

If you are the “sole indispensable” country in the world, though, you are sorely tempted not to heed the worrywarts.

Seeds of a Crisis

On Wednesday, Lavrov said the seeds of the current Ukraine crisis were sown in April 2008 during the NATO summit in Bucharest when NATO leaders stated in a declaration that “Georgia and Ukraine will be in NATO.”

Were Lavrov not the consummate diplomat, he might have also told his interviewer that, two months before the Bucharest summit, he had warned U.S. Ambassador to Russia William J. Burns to anticipate a strong Russian reaction to including Ukraine and Georgia in NATO. But diplomats don’t generally permit themselves an “I told you so.”

Thanks to Pvt. Chelsea (formerly Bradley) Manning and WikiLeaks, we have the text of a State Department cable dated Feb. 1, 2008, from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow bearing the unusual title: “NYET MEANS NYET: RUSSIA’S NATO ENLARGEMENT REDLINES.”

The IMMEDIATE precedence that the cable bears shows that Ambassador Burns (now Deputy Secretary of State) was addressing a priority issue under active consideration in Washington. Though it was six years ago, Burns interlocutor was the same Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Here is Burns’s introductory summary of his discussions with Lavrov:

“Summary. Following a muted first reaction to Ukraine’s intent to seek a NATO membership action plan at the [upcoming] Bucharest summit, Foreign Minister Lavrov and other senior officials have reiterated strong opposition, stressing that Russia would view further eastward expansion as a potential military threat. NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains ‘an emotional and neuralgic’ issue for Russia, but strategic policy considerations also underlie strong opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia.

“In Ukraine, these include fears that the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene.”

Ambassador Burns continued: “Russia has made it clear that it would have to ‘seriously review’ its entire relationship with Ukraine and Georgia in the event of NATO inviting them to join. This could include major impacts on energy, economic, and political-military engagement, with possible repercussions throughout the region and into Central and Western Europe.”

Burns's closing comment: "Russia's opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia is both emotional and based on perceived strategic concerns about the impact on Russia's interest in the region. ... While Russian opposition to the first round of NATO enlargement in the mid-1990s was strong, Russia now feels itself able to respond more forcefully to what it perceives as actions contrary to its national interests."

We don't know whether Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice read Burns's prescient remarks, but Lavrov's warning clearly fell on deaf ears. On April 3, 2008, the NATO summit in Bucharest issued a formal declaration that "NATO welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO."

Now, with events quickly spinning out of control in Ukraine, some policymakers need to tell President Obama that there can be even bigger trouble ahead, if Russia's national security interests are not taken into account.

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Why the US Obsession over Ukraine?

The U.S. government acts like it has a vital interest in separating Ukraine from Russia, even if that sparks a civil war among Ukrainians and disrupts Europe's economic recovery. A slightly varied history might have given a different perspective, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Imagine that the collapse of Soviet communism more than two decades ago had taken a different form than it did. It might have done so, if the dramatic and fast-moving events of 1991 and key people who participated in them had taken a few different turns.

Today we associate the collapse with the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. and its replacement by 15 independent republics. But the break-up of that union did not need to be part of the failure and demise of the Leninist method of organizing politics, economics and society that we came to know as Soviet communism.

It is true that separatist sentiment had become by early 1991 a significant part of the growing political crisis in the Soviet Union, with the Baltic republics and Georgia making declarations of independence. Even then, however, the break-up of the union was by no means certain. The center was using military force to try to bring the Lithuanians back in line and Mikhail Gorbachev was supporting the adoption of a new charter, to replace one from 1922, aimed at mollifying sentiment in the non-Russian republics while preserving some sort of union.

The career track of Boris Yeltsin had as much as anything else to do with the political shape events in the Soviet Union would take later in 1991. Yeltsin had risen to senior posts in the union power structure before having a falling out with Gorbachev and others in the Soviet regime. He happened to make his political comeback in the government of the Russian republic, and was elected president of that republic in mid-1991.

Thus Yeltsin was in that position when he climbed atop a tank to face down the Soviet hardliners who attempted a coup in August while Gorbachev was vacationing at his dacha in Crimea. This meant that once the coup was defeated and Gorbachev's power waned as Yeltsin's waxed, power went from the union government to the Russian republic. Yeltsin scooped up union ministries and made them Russian ones, and when Gorbachev resigned as the last Soviet president later in the year there was barely a shell of a union government left.

It is plausible to imagine a different scenario in which the government structures that emerged from the wreckage of the U.S.S.R. would have looked substantially different. Suppose Yeltsin had taken his defiant, tank-climbing action not as president of the Russian republic but as a reformist party chief of the Moscow region, a job he had once held, along with sitting on the politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Perhaps this would have meant significant power remaining at the level of a reconstituted union.

Such speculation does not say anything about the relative likelihood of the scenario being posited, although the scenario can be the basis for a useful thought experiment if it is at least plausible. Nationalist sentiment in the constituent republics would always have been a significant factor to be reckoned with.

Probably what is most implausible about any continued post-Soviet union would be inclusion of the Baltic republics. They alone among the republics of the U.S.S.R. had a history as independent states as recently as 1940. The United States and the West never recognized their annexation by Moscow, and the Baltics' westward orientation has always been strong.

The relevant thought experiment worth doing is to ask: if some sort of union

(even without the Baltic states) had endured, how would we in the United States have assessed the events back in the 1990s, and how would we see our interests in that part of the world today?

There still would have been sufficient basis on which to say that the Cold War was over and that our side had “won” it. Moscow had already lost its Eastern European empire, and the Warsaw Pact was gone. Although there would not have been as distinctive a dissolution of the U.S.S.R. as in fact happened with the creation of 14 independent states plus the successor state of Russia, the collapse of Soviet communism and the Leninist system would still have been readily apparent.

The collapse would have been memorialized in a new name for the union, because it no longer would be calling itself “Soviet” or “socialist”; the name picked for the new union charter that was being negotiated in Gorbachev’s time was “Union of Sovereign States.” Creation of a bunch of new, completely independent, Eurasian nation-states was not intrinsic to winning the Cold War, any more than were the later divorce of Czechs and Slovaks or the break-up of Yugoslavia.

George Kennan in his “X” article, the playbook for containment of the U.S.S.R., did not address the issue of nationalities or dissolution of the union. The article uses “Soviet” and “Russian” almost interchangeably. He left open a variety of possible successful outcomes of Cold War containment, stating that the self-destructive forces he perceived in the Soviet Union “must eventually find their outlet in either the breakup or the gradual mellowing of Soviet power.”

Other considerations also should be kept in mind when answering the thought experiment’s question. One is that the political histories of several of the non-Russian former Soviet republics can hardly be said to constitute victories for Western-style freedom and democracy. Thus neither, in this particular respect, was the break-up of the Soviet Union. A current reminder that is geographically close to the West is the strident authoritarianism of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus.

In several of the republics, independence meant that regional Communist Party bosses clung to power as presidents. Two of those bosses, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, are still in power today. Another one of them, the late Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan, created a cult of personality that rivaled those of Stalin and the Kim family of North Korea. Even some of these strongmen, including Lukashenko and Niyazov, opposed the break-up of the U.S.S.R. at the time.

All of this is relevant to how the United States should perceive its interests

today regarding the crisis in Ukraine. If there now existed a Union of Sovereign States, Russians in Moscow would lead it and Ukraine would be a part of it. We in the United States would still be proud winners of the Cold War, happy to see Marxism-Leninism having been discredited and communists in that part of the world reduced to a political opposition. Living with that arrangement would not be a major issue for the vast majority of U.S. and Western observers.

Of course, actual events, rather than hypothetical alternative histories, affect interests and how they ought to be conceived as well as how they actually are conceived. In the Ukrainian situation, the interests chiefly involved concern upholding international norms, especially the norms of non-aggression and respect for state sovereignty. The events of 1991 did not change facts of geography and demography that, whether we like to think this way or not, mean Russia has substantially greater strategic interest in the distribution of power in and around Ukraine than the United States does.

We do not like to think that way, partly because the events of 1991 gave us a bonus to our Cold War victory in the form of the outright dissolution of the U.S.S.R. and a sudden, drastic contraction of Russian influence. Anything that is perceived as a loss for our side (as any reassertion of Russian influence in this area would be), whether what is lost started out as a bonus or not, is harder to take than not having won it in the first place. This is a good illustration of prospect theory, but it is not a good basis for defining national interests and making policy.

The best, and probably only feasible, resolution of the crisis over Ukraine remains a Finlandized Ukraine for which joining any military alliance is firmly ruled out and significant power has been devolved from the central government to the regions. Keeping in mind how the history of the U.S.S.R. could have taken another track will help to remind us of how good an arrangement that would be for our side, as well as for Ukrainians.

It also will help us to achieve greater clarity, which is sorely lacking in much of the American debate over Ukraine, in defining our interests and objectives as we decide on the next moves in jousting with one of Boris Yeltsin's other major legacies: his hand-picked successor as president of Russia, Vladimir Putin.

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The Impending Afghan Defeat

Frustrated over negotiations for a stay-behind force of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, President Obama is now weighing the possibility of a faster withdrawal and a “zero option” on troops going forward. That may signal the belated recognition of twin American defeats in the Afghan and Iraq wars, says Beverly Bandler.

By Beverly Bandler

Americans hate the word “defeat” but that is what we face in Afghanistan. After nearly 12 years, the longest war in U.S. history is winding down with an almost inconceivably staggering cost in blood, treasure and what economists call *opportunity cost*, the value of the best alternative forgone.

As Tom Engelhardt, author of *The End of Victory Culture*, wrote, “Leave the mystery of who beat us to the historians.”

Yet, while future historians may provide the details of the U.S. defeat in Afghanistan, one assessment is possible now: The United States was defeated most of all by its own arrogance and ignorance. The cause for this defeat was bipartisan, implicating both Democrats and Republicans, neoconservatives and neoliberals as well as hubristic officials at the CIA and tunnel-vision generals dispatched by the Pentagon.

The folly dates back more than three decades to 1979 when President Jimmy Carter’s hard-line national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski devised a plan to poke at the Soviet Union by helping Islamist mujahedeen warriors harass the Soviet-allied government in Afghanistan. Brzezinski hoped the provoked Russian bear would fall into an “Afghan trap.”

After the Soviets invaded to protect the embattled regime in Kabul, President Ronald Reagan ratcheted up covert U.S. military assistance into the hundreds of millions of dollars and got Saudi Arabia to send a matching amount. The mujahedeen’s supply lines and much of the command and control was delegated to Pakistani intelligence which favored the most radical Islamists, including Saudi militant Osama bin Laden and his Arab fighters.

In 1989, Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev withdrew the battered Soviet army and sought a power-sharing arrangement that would merge the Kabul regime with the CIA-backed mujahedeen. But President George H.W. Bush heeding the advice of his deputy national security adviser (and former senior CIA official) Robert Gates rebuffed Gorbachev’s offer and pressed on, seeking a clear-cut U.S.

victory.

Passing up Gorbachev's peace offer represented a major opportunity lost. Instead of a possible peace deal, the Afghan conflict continued inconclusively for years as the country descended deeper and deeper into civil war with various well-armed warlords battling for turf and power.

Finally, Pakistan's ISI the Inter-Services Intelligence recruited a new force of militant Pashtuns from Afghan refugee camps and supported their drive on Kabul. This force, known as the Taliban, took power in 1996, ruthlessly disposed of its rivals, imposed a fundamentalist version of Islam and granted safe haven to Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organization.

We will probably never know how much U.S. money (along with Saudi funds) was funneled to the most brutal of the fundamentalist fighters from the "Islamic Right," including bin Laden. But the Afghan covert operation was one of the longest and most expensive in CIA history, with funding beginning with about \$20 million in 1980 and rising to around \$630 million per year in 1987. An ABC News report said \$3 billion was poured into the Afghan resistance via the CIA.

The end result of that massive investment was that by the late 1990s the radical Taliban was in power and the stage was set for an escalation of al-Qaeda's war against its new enemy, the United States. The group hit American targets in the Middle East and Africa before taking aim on New York and Washington in the 9/11 attacks in 2001.

Classic Blowback

It was a classic case of what's known in the intelligence trade as "blowback," retaliation for some violent intervention in some faraway land, an unintended cause and effect. In this case, many Americans expressed bewilderment over "why they hate us" so much that young men would commit mass suicide and murder thousands of innocents to get revenge. There was little collective American knowledge about the devastation inflicted by U.S. foreign policy on Afghanistan and other Muslim lands.

President George W. Bush exploited this national confusion by providing his own nonsensical answer, "because they hate our freedoms." Bush also harnessed American fury over 9/11 to brush aside a Taliban offer to negotiate bin Laden's surrender and instead launched an invasion of Afghanistan.

U.S. forces and allied Afghan militias quickly ousted the Taliban but failed to get bin Laden, who managed to flee to Pakistan. Bush then pivoted U.S. military attention to Iraq, leaving the Afghan occupation/reconstruction to muddle along as the U.S.-backed government of Hamid Karzai stumbled and Taliban regrouped.

In 2009, President Barack Obama refocused U.S. attention on Afghanistan, as he pulled U.S. troops out of Iraq. He also acquiesced to demands for a larger Afghan military escalation from then-Defense Secretary Robert Gates, General David Petraeus and other leftovers from Bush's high command.

Obama was finally able to complete the mission of eliminating bin Laden with a Special Forces raid into Pakistan on May 2, 2011. But the Gates-Petraeus counterinsurgency "surge" in Afghanistan bogged down with little measurable success. Finally, Obama began to withdraw U.S. forces amid continuing squabbles with President Karzai about the size of an American stay-behind force.

On Tuesday, the New York Times reported that an "increasingly frustrated" Obama is now considering an accelerated withdrawal of the remaining U.S. combat troops by mid-2014 and a "zero option" going forward, meaning no U.S. troops remaining in Afghanistan and the Karzai government left to face the Taliban, more or less, alone.

The prospect of so much invested in American blood and treasure with so little to show for the effort has led journalist Ann Jones to cite the Afghan War as a threefold failure: "no peace, no democracy, and no reconstruction."

Looking back over the past 11½ years from 9/11 to today it now appears clear that the United States fell into its own "Afghan trap," becoming just the latest nation taught painful lessons from "the graveyard of empires." Or as Sir John Templeton once said, "The four most expensive words in the English language are: 'This time it's different.'"

An Enduring Crisis

It seems now that the only thing that will be enduring from Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan will be the human suffering of the survivors and the fiscal crisis caused by fighting the Afghan and Iraq wars on borrowed money.

Professor Linda J. Bilmes of Harvard's Kennedy School estimated that the total costs of the Afghan and Iraq wars will be between \$4 trillion and \$6 trillion, making them "the most expensive wars in U.S. history." She added: "One of the most significant challenges to future U.S. national security policy will not originate from any external threat. Rather it is simply coping with the legacy of the conflicts we have already fought in Iraq and Afghanistan."

The latest casualty figures indicate a U.S. death toll in Afghanistan of 2,249, along with about 1,100 more dead among coalition allies. Summarizing just part of the costs for the Afghan people, Chalmers Johnson wrote in 2004: "1.8 million Afghan casualties, 2.6 million refugees, and 10 million unexploded land-mines."

The long litany of U.S. miscalculations resulted from a willful ignorance of Middle East and Afghanistan history by Washington's "group think" community, not to mention the refusal of these "experts" to learn from the lessons Vietnam and the more recent Soviet experience in Afghanistan.

The corporate media and the U.S. public also must accept a share of responsibility for the fiasco, being so easily manipulated by flag-waving jingoism and by Hollywood movies, such as the Cold War propaganda of "Charlie Wilson's War" which reveled in the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan.

Today, at home, the U.S. is itself challenged with an "unraveling" due to dysfunctional polarized politics and a weakened economy, a good part of the latter the result of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

"Mark the moment," wrote Tom Engelhardt regarding what may be an empire-ending moment for the United States. "It's historic."

Beverly Bandler's public affairs career spans some 40 years. Her credentials include serving as president of the state-level League of Women Voters of the Virgin Islands and extensive public education efforts in the Washington, D.C. area for 16 years. She writes from Mexico. Her e-mail is bgbandler@yahoo.com.

Some perspectives:

Lt. Gen. Ruslan Aushev: "The fundamental problem in Afghanistan is that it isn't a country in the way the West thinks of countries...There has never been any real centralized state in Afghanistan. There is no such nation as Afghanistan. There are (ethnic groups of) Pashtuns, Uzbeks and Tajiks, and they all have different tribal policies." [Lasseter]

Sarah Chayes: "Afghans remember the reign in the 1960s and '70s of King Zahir Shah and his cousin Daoud Khan, when Afghan cities were among the most developed and cosmopolitan in the Muslim world..." "The hopes expressed by every Afghan I have encountered – to be ruled by a responsive and respectful government run by educated people – have been dashed" "Ask any Afghan what's really needed, what would render the Taliban irrelevant, and they'll tell you: improving the behavior of the officials whom the United States and its allies ushered into power after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks."

Zamir N. Kabulov: "Zamir N. Kabulov, Russia's ambassador to Kabul [until 2009], warned of grim prospects for the American 'enterprise' in Afghanistan if the United States failed to learn from the mistakes of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. 'They listen, but they do not hear,' he said. 'Their attitude is, "The past is the past," and that they know more than I do.' " [Burns].

Andrew J. Bacevich: “[T]he attempt to create a cohesive nation-state governed from Kabul (something that has never existed in modern times) is a fool’s errand. Better to acknowledge and build on the Afghan tradition of decentralized governance. Let tribal chiefs rule: just provide them with incentives to keep jihadists out. Where incentives don’t work, punitive action, U.S. air strikes in neighboring Pakistan provide an illustrative example, can serve as a backup. Denying terrorists sanctuary in Afghanistan does not require pacification, and leaving Afghans to manage their own affairs as they always have will reduce internal instability, while freeing up the resources to allow our own country to tackle other challenges more pressing than the quixotic quest to modernize Afghanistan.”

Chalmers Johnson: “Steve Coll ends his important book on Afghanistan by quoting Afghan President Hamid Karzai: “What an unlucky country.” Americans might find this a convenient way to ignore what their government did in Afghanistan between 1979 and the present, but luck had nothing to do with it. Brutal, incompetent, secret operations of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, frequently manipulated by the military intelligence agencies of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, caused the catastrophic devastation of this poor country. On the evidence contained in Coll’s book *Ghost Wars*, neither the Americans nor their victims in numerous Muslim and Third World countries will ever know peace until the Central Intelligence Agency has been abolished.” [2004]

Tom Engelhardt: “Seldom has anyone answered better than [Chalmers] Johnson (1931-2010) did questions like: Why, for 20 of the last 32 years, have we ended up fighting wars in a country to which few Americans had previously paid the slightest attention? How could we have armed and supported a whole crew of Islamic fundamentalists in the first of those wars who would be our enemies in the second? How did we end up with hijacked planes taking down towers on American soil in 2001? How, in response, did we launch a “global war on terror” that shows no sign of ending? And here’s the saddest part of the story, if you even care to think about it (and these days few Americans do): we’re not done yet. The Afghan War goes on and on. Yes, the security forces we’re building up in that country are regularly deserting or blowing away our trainers and advisers; our reconstruction projects are, as they’ve long been, as they were in Iraq, a joke; the U.S. military has proven incapable of suppressing the minority insurgency it faces; and the corruption our money has engendered is staggering in an otherwise still poverty-stricken land. And yet our leaders are planning to leave U.S. trainers, advisors, and bases in Afghanistan until at least 2020.” “the Afghan drawdown of 2013-2014, that implicit acknowledgement of yet another lost war, should set the curtain falling on the American Century as we’ve known it...leave the mystery of who beat us to the historians, but mark the moment. It’s

historic.” [August 2012/January 2013]

Gordon M. Goldstein: “For each year of combat from 1965 to 1973 [in Vietnam], [McGeorge] Bundy observed, the United States inflicted far greater casualties on the enemy than it absorbed. Yet despite this dramatic disparity, it was the United States that withdrew its forces ‘home without victory.’ “

Richard Holbrooke: *Posthumously, based on Holbrooke’s notes, interviews with Kati Marton, his widow.* “Holbrooke opposed the military ‘surge’ in Afghanistan and would see the demise of Bin Laden as an opportunity to go into diplomatic overdrive. He believed strongly that the only way out of the mess in Afghanistan was a peace deal with the Taliban, and his team was secretly engaged in outreach to figures linked to the Taliban, [Kati] Marton says.

‘Reconciliation, that was what he was working toward in Afghanistan, and building up the civilian and political side that had been swamped by the military,’ Marton recalled. ‘The whole policy was off-kilter, way too militarized. Richard never thought that this war could be won on the battlefield’ Vali Nasr, a member of Holbrooke’s team at the State Department, puts it this way: ‘He understood from his experience that every conflict has to end at the negotiating table.’ ” [Kristoff] “Let me be clear on one thing, everybody understands that this war will not end in a clear-cut military victory. It’s not going to end on the deck of a battleship like World War II, or Dayton, Ohio, like the Bosnian war,” Holbrooke told reporters last July. “It’s going to have some different ending from that, some form of political settlements are necessary; you can’t have a settlement with al-Qaeda, you can’t talk to them, you can’t negotiate with them, it’s out of the question. But it is possible to talk to Taliban leaders.” [Kristoff, Time]

Anatol Lieven: “A very strange idea has spread in the Western media concerning **Afghanistan:** that the US military is withdrawing from the country next year, and that the present Afghan war has therefore entered into an “endgame.” The use of these phrases reflects a degree of unconscious wishful thinking that amounts to collective self-delusion. In fact, according a treaty signed by the United States and the Karzai administration, US military bases, aircraft, special forces, and advisers will remain in Afghanistan at least until the treaty expires in 2024. These US forces will be tasked with targeting remaining elements of al-Qaeda and other international terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan and Pakistan; but equally importantly, they will be there to prop up the existing Afghan state against overthrow by the Taliban...The struggle for power in Afghanistan will not “end” and US policymakers should not, as in the past, hop away from a swamp they’ve done much to create.” [April 2013]

Ann Jones: “Compromise, conflict, or collapse: ask an Afghan what to expect in

2014 and you're likely to get a scenario that falls under one of those three headings. 2014, of course, is the year of the double whammy in Afghanistan: the next presidential election coupled with the departure of most American and other foreign forces. Many Afghans fear a turn for the worse, while others are no less afraid that everything will stay the same. Only one thing is certain in 2014: it will be a year of American military defeat. For more than a decade, U.S. forces have fought many types of wars in Afghanistan, from a low-footprint invasion, to multiple surges, to a flirtation with Vietnam-style counterinsurgency, to a ramped-up, gloves-off air war. And yet, despite all the experiments in styles of war-making, the American military and its coalition partners have ended up in the same place: stalemate, which in a battle with guerrillas means defeat."

Abdul Nasir: "Nasir celebrated the American invasion in 2001, and, in the decade that followed, he prospered, and fathered six children. But now, with the United States planning its withdrawal by the end of 2014, Nasir blames the Americans for a string of catastrophic errors. "The Americans have failed to build a single sustainable institution here," he said. "All they have done is make a small group of people very rich. And now they are getting ready to go..." "Everyone is getting ready for 2014..." the moment the Americans leave, the civil war will begin," he said. "This country will be divided into twenty-five or thirty fiefdoms, each with its own government. " [Filkins]

Robert Dreyfuss: "If there is going to be a peaceful end to the war in Afghanistan unlikely as that may be, it will come when the United States, Afghanistan and Pakistan all agree on a rebalancing of the government in Kabul, probably with a new constitution and probably either including the Taliban in the new regime or giving the Taliban effective control of parts of southern Afghanistan in some sort of federal system. Indeed, the Afghan government is being sidelined, having been propped up by the United States since 2001, with a haphazard military and security forces that can't sustain themselves. It's long been obvious that a political accommodation with the Taliban is necessary. If it isn't achieved, then either the United States will have to stay engaged in Afghanistan for another ten years or more, continuing to prop up a regime that can't last, or Afghanistan will plunge into an intensified civil war. In such a war, it isn't clear if the Taliban can retake Kabul. Far more likely, it will be a war without end, with the Pakistan-backed Taliban establishing itself in the south and east as India-backed forces control the north and Iran-backed forces control the west."

Linda J. Bilmes: "The Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, taken together, will be the most expensive wars in US history totaling somewhere between \$4 to \$6 trillion. One of the most significant challenges to future US national security policy will not originate from any external threat. Rather it is simply coping

with the legacy of the conflicts we have already fought in Iraq and Afghanistan.” Linda J. Bilmes, March 2013.

Dexter Filkins: “After eleven years, nearly two thousand Americans killed, sixteen thousand Americans wounded, nearly four hundred billion* dollars spent, and more than twelve thousand Afghan civilians dead since 2007, the war in Afghanistan has come to this: the United States is leaving, mission not accomplished. Objectives once deemed indispensable, such as nation-building and counterinsurgency, have been abandoned or downgraded, either because they haven’t worked or because there’s no longer enough time to achieve them. Even the education of girls, a signal achievement of the NATO presence in Afghanistan, is at risk. By the end of 2014, when the last Americans are due to stop fighting, the Taliban will not be defeated. A Western-style democracy will not be in place. The economy will not be self-sustaining. No senior Afghan official will likely be imprisoned for any crime, no matter how egregious. And it’s a good bet that, in some remote mountain valley, even Al Qaeda, which brought the United States to Afghanistan in the first place, will be carrying on.”[July, 2012] *Cost of War puts the cost at more than \$639 billion.

Lt. Gen. Ruslan Aushev did two tours in Afghanistan for the USSR and left as a regimental commander. **Andrew J. Bacevich** is a professor of history and international relations specializing in security studies, foreign policy and military history at Boston University and an author. He served for twenty-three years as an officer in the U.S. Army. **Linda J. Bilmes** teaches public policy, budgeting and public finance at Harvard University. She is a leading national expert on financial, budgeting, veterans and civil services issues and credited with drawing attention to the Iraq War costs. **Sarah Chayes:** Former NPR reporter, currently a senior associate in the South Asia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. **Robert Dreyfuss:** An independent journalist who specializes in magazine features, profiles, and investigative stories in the areas of politics and national security **Tom Engelhardt** is an author, co-founder of the American Empire Project and creator of the blog Tomdispatch.com. **Dexter Filkins** is an American journalist known primarily for his coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in 2002 for his dispatches from Afghanistan. He currently writes for *The New Yorker*. **Gordon M. Goldstein** is an author and scholar of international affairs who has served as an international security adviser to the Strategic Planning Unit of the Executive Office of the United Nations Secretary-General, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations. **Richard Holbrooke** (1941-2010) was one of the most influential of American diplomats. He was the only person to have held the position of assistant secretary of state for two different regions of the world (Asia, and Europe). He was special adviser on Pakistan and Afghanistan from January 2009 until his death in December, 2010. **Chalmers Johnson** (1931-2010) was an American

author, CIA consultant (1967-1973), president and co-founder of the Japan Policy Institute. A former cold warrior, he changed his mind and examined the consequences of American Empire. **Ann Jones** is an award-winning journalist, women's rights activist, and author of a number of non-fiction books about her research into women's and humanitarian issues. Jones has provided humanitarian aid around the world, including Afghanistan. **Zamir N. Kabulov** a high-rank diplomat who was Russia's ambassador to Kabul until 2009. He served as a K.G.B. agent in Kabul, Moscow's top spy in the 1980s and 1990s during and after the nine-year Soviet military occupation. **Anatol Lievan** is a British author, journalist and policy analyst who focuses on U.S. global strategy and the War on Terrorism, and currently with the New America Foundation. **Abdul Nasir** An agricultural student from a secular family at Kabul University in 1992, he is now a TV producer for one of the many private channels that have sprung up since 2004.

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Hollywood's Dangerous Afghan Illusion

Special Report: A newly discovered document undercuts a key storyline of the anti-Soviet Afghan war of the 1980s that it was "Charlie Wilson's War." A note inside Ronald Reagan's White House targeted the Texas Democrat as someone "to bring into circle as discrete Hill connection," Robert Parry reports.

By Robert Parry

Official Washington's conventional wisdom about Afghanistan derives to a dangerous degree from a Hollywood movie, "Charlie Wilson's War," which depicted the anti-Soviet war of the 1980s as a fight pitting good "freedom fighters" vs. evil "occupiers" and which blamed Afghanistan's later descent into chaos on feckless U.S. politicians quitting as soon as Soviet troops left in 1989.

The Tom Hanks movie also pushed the theme that the war was really the pet project of a maverick Democratic congressman from Texas, Charlie Wilson, who fell in love with the Afghan mujahedeen after falling in love with a glamorous Texas oil woman, Joanne Herring, who was committed to their anti-communist cause.



However, "Charlie Wilson's War" like many Hollywood films took extraordinary license with the facts, presenting many of the war's core elements incorrectly. That in itself might not be a serious problem, except that key U.S. policymakers have cited these mythical "facts" as lessons to guide the current U.S. military occupation of Afghanistan.

The degree to which Ronald Reagan's White House saw Wilson as more puppet than puppet-master is underscored by a newly discovered document at Reagan's presidential library in Simi Valley, California. I found the document in the files of former CIA propaganda chief Walter Raymond Jr., who in the 1980s oversaw the selling of U.S. interventions in Central America and Afghanistan from his office at the National Security Council.

The handwritten note to Raymond appears to be initialed by then-National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane and instructs Raymond to recruit Wilson into the Reagan administration's effort to drum up more Afghan war money for the fiscal 1985 budget. The note reads:

"Walt, Go see Charlie Wilson (D-TX). Seek to bring him into circle as discrete

Hill connection. He can be very helpful in getting money. M.” (The notation may have used the wrong adjective, possibly intending “discreet,” meaning circumspect and suggesting a secretive role, not “discrete,” meaning separate and distinct.)

Raymond appears to have followed up those instructions, as Wilson began to play a bigger and bigger role in unleashing the great Afghan spending spree of 1985 and as Raymond asserted himself behind the scenes on how the war should be sold to the American people.

Raymond, a 30-year veteran of CIA clandestine services, was a slight, soft-spoken New Yorker who reminded some of a character from a John le Carre spy novel, an intelligence officer who “easily fades into the woodwork,” according to one Raymond acquaintance. But his CIA career took a dramatic turn in 1982 when he was reassigned to the NSC.

At the time, the White House saw a need to step up its domestic propaganda operations in support of President Reagan’s desire to intervene more aggressively in Central America and Afghanistan. The American people still stung by the agony of the Vietnam War were not eager to engage in more foreign adventures.

So, Reagan’s team took aim at “kicking the Vietnam Syndrome” mostly by wildly exaggerating the Soviet threat. It became crucial to convince Americans that the Soviets were on the rise and on the march, though in reality the Soviets were on the decline and eager for accommodations with the West.

Yet, as deputy assistant secretary to the Air Force, J. Michael Kelly, put it, “the most critical special operations mission we have ... is to persuade the American people that the communists are out to get us.”

The main focus of the administration’s domestic propaganda was on Central America where Reagan was arming right-wing military juntas engaged in anti-leftist extermination campaigns. Through the CIA, Reagan also was organizing a drug-tainted terrorist operation known as the Contras to overthrow Nicaragua’s leftist Sandinista government.

To hide the ugly realities and to overcome popular opposition to the policies, Reagan granted CIA Director William Casey extraordinary leeway to engage in CIA-style propaganda and disinformation aimed at the American people, the sort of project normally reserved for hostile countries. To oversee the operation while skirting legal bans on the CIA operating domestically Casey moved Raymond from the CIA to the NSC staff.

Raymond formally resigned from the CIA in April 1983 so, he said, “there would

be no question whatsoever of any contamination of this." But from the beginning, Raymond fretted about the legality of Casey's involvement. Raymond confided in one memo that it was important "to get [Casey] out of the loop," but Casey never backed off and Raymond continued to send progress reports to his old boss well into 1986.

It was "the kind of thing which [Casey] had a broad catholic interest in," Raymond shrugged during a deposition given to congressional Iran-Contra investigators in 1987. Raymond offered the excuse that Casey undertook this apparently illegal interference in domestic politics "not so much in his CIA hat, but in his adviser to the president hat."

Raymond also understood that the administration's hand in the P.R. projects must stay hidden, because of other legal bans on executive-branch propaganda. "The work down within the administration has to, by definition, be at arms length," Raymond noted in an Aug. 29, 1983, memo.

As one NSC official told me, the campaign was modeled after CIA covert operations abroad where a political goal is more important than the truth. "They were trying to manipulate [U.S.] public opinion ... using the tools of Walt Raymond's trade craft which he learned from his career in the CIA covert operation shop," the official said.

From the NSC, Raymond organized inter-agency task forces to bombard the U.S. public with hyped-up propaganda about the Soviet threat in Central America and in Afghanistan. Raymond's goal was to change the way Americans viewed these dangers, a process that the Reagan administration internally called "perception management."

Scores of documents about this operation were released during the Iran-Contra scandal in 1987, but Washington-based journalists never paid much attention to the evidence about how they had been manipulated by these propaganda tactics, which included rewarding cooperative reporters with government-sponsored "leaks" and punishing those who wouldn't parrot the lies with whispering campaigns in the ears of their editors and bureau chiefs. [See Robert Parry's *Lost History*.]

Even after the Iran-Contra scandal was exposed in 1986 and Casey died of brain cancer in 1987, the Republicans fought to keep secret the remarkable story of this propaganda apparatus. As part of a deal to get three moderate Republican senators to join Democrats in signing the Iran-Contra report, Democratic leaders dropped a draft chapter on the CIA's domestic propaganda role.

Thus, the American people were spared the chapter's troubling conclusion: that a covert propaganda apparatus had existed, run by "one of the CIA's most senior

specialists, sent to the NSC by Bill Casey, to create and coordinate an inter-agency public-diplomacy mechanism [which] did what a covert CIA operation in a foreign country might do. [It] attempted to manipulate the media, the Congress and public opinion to support the Reagan administration's policies." [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Iran-Contra's Lost Chapter](#)."]]

Raping Russians

Hiding the unspeakable realities of the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan was almost as high a priority as concealing the U.S.-backed slaughter in Central America. Reagan's pet "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan as in Nicaragua were tainted by the drug trade as well as by well-documented cases of torture, rape and murder.

Yet, Raymond and his propagandists were always looking for new ways to "sell" the wars to the American people, leading to a clash with CIA officer Gust Avrakotos, who was overseeing the Afghan conflict and who had developed his own close ties to Rep. Charlie Wilson.

According to author George Crile, whose book *Charlie Wilson's War* provided a loose framework for the movie of the same name, Avrakotos clashed with Raymond and other senior Reagan administration officials when they proposed unrealistic propaganda themes regarding Afghanistan.

One of Raymond's ideas was to get some Russian soldiers to "defect" and then fly them from Afghanistan to Washington where they would renounce communism. The problem, as Avrakotos explained, was that the Afghan mujahideen routinely tortured and then murdered any Soviet soldier who fell into their hands, except for a few who were kept around for anal rape.

"For Avrakotos, 1985 was a year of right-wing craziness," Crile wrote. "A band of well-placed anti-Communist enthusiasts in the administration had come up with a plan they believed would bring down the Red Army, if the CIA would only be willing to implement it. The leading advocates of this plan included Richard Perle at the Pentagon. [NSC aide] Oliver North also checked in briefly, but the man who set Avrakotos's teeth on edge most was Walt Raymond, another NSC staffer who had spent twenty years with the CIA as a propagandist.

"Their idea was to encourage Soviet officers and soldiers to defect to the mujahideen. As Avrakotos derisively describes it, 'The muj were supposed to set up loudspeakers in the mountains announcing such things as "Lay down your arms, there is a passage to the West and to freedom."' Once news of this program made its way through the Red Army, it was argued, there would be a flood of defectors.

“Avrakotos thought North and Perle were ‘cuckoos of the Far Right,’ and he soon felt quite certain that Raymond, the man who seemed to be the intellectual ringleader, was truly detached from reality. ‘What Russian in his right mind would defect to those fuckers all armed to the teeth,’ Avrakotos said in frustration. ‘To begin with, anyone defecting to the Dushman would have to be a crook, a thief or someone who wanted to get cornholed every day, because nine out of ten prisoners were dead within twenty-four hours and they were always turned into concubines by the mujahideen. I felt so sorry for them I wanted to have them all shot.’

“The meeting [with Raymond’s team] went very badly indeed. Gust [Avrakotos] accused North and Perle of being idiots. Avrakotos said to Walt Raymond, ‘You know, Walt, you’re just a fucking asshole, you’re irrelevant.’”

However, as Crile wrote, Avrakotos “greatly underestimated the political power and determination of the group, who went directly to [CIA Director] Bill Casey to angrily protest Avrakotos’s insulting manner. The director complained to [CIA operations official] Clair George, who responded by forbidding Avrakotos to attend any more interagency meetings without a CIA nanny present.

“Avrakotos arrived for one of these White House sessions armed with five huge photographic blowups. One of them showed two Russian sergeants being used as concubines. Another had a Russian hanging from the turret of a tank with a vital part of his anatomy removed. ‘If you were a sane fucking Russian, would you defect to these people?’ he had demanded of Perle.

“But the issue wouldn’t go away. Perle, Raymond, and the others continued to insist that the Agency find and send back to the United States the many Russian defectors they seemed to believe, despite Avrakotos’s denials, the mujahideen were harboring.

“It had been almost impossible to locate two prisoners, much less two defectors. The CIA found itself in the preposterous position of having to pony up \$50,000 to bribe the Afghans to deliver two live ones. ‘These two guys were basket cases,’ says Avrakotos. ‘One had been fucked so many times he didn’t know what was going on.’”

Despite this knowledge about the true nature of the Afghan “freedom fighters,” the Reagan administration and the “Charlie Wilson’s War” moviemakers concealed from the American people the inhuman brutality of the jihadists who were receiving billions of dollars in U.S. and Saudi largesse. The movie depicted the Soviet soldiers as sadistic monsters and the mujahideen as noble warriors, just as Ronald Reagan and Walter Raymond would have wanted. (Raymond died in 2003; Reagan in 2004; the movie appeared in 2007.)

But the Reagan administration did calculate correctly that Wilson from his key position on a House Appropriations defense subcommittee could open the spigot on funding for the Afghan muj.

Learning Wrong Lessons

While it's not unusual for Hollywood to produce a Cold War propaganda film, what was different about "Charlie Wilson's War" was how it was treated by Official Washington as something close to a documentary. That attitude was somewhat a tribute to the likeable Tom Hanks who portrayed the womanizing and hard-drinking Charlie Wilson.

Yet, perhaps the biggest danger in viewing the movie as truth was its treatment of why the anti-Soviet jihad led to Afghanistan becoming home to the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorists in the 1990s. The movie pushed the myth that the United States abruptly abandoned Afghanistan as soon as the Soviet troops left on Feb. 15, 1989.

All across Official Washington, pundits and policymakers have embraced the lesson that the United States must not make that "mistake" again and thus must leave behind a sizeable force of U.S. troops.

For instance, the New York Times' lead editorial on May 1, 2012, criticized President Barack Obama for not explaining how he would prevent Afghanistan from imploding after the scheduled U.S. troop withdrawal in 2014, though the Times added that the plan's "longer-term commitment [of aid] sends an important message to Afghans that Washington will not abandon them as it did after the Soviets were driven out."

The abandonment myth also has been cited by senior Obama administration officials, including U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker and Defense Secretary Robert Gates, as they explained the rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s and al-Qaeda's use of Afghanistan for plotting the 9/11 attacks on the United States in 2001.

In late 2009, Defense Secretary Gates reprised this phony conventional wisdom, telling reporters: "We will not repeat the mistakes of 1989, when we abandoned the country only to see it descend into civil war and into Taliban hands." However, that narrative was based on a faux reality drawn from a fictional movie.

Gates knew the real history. After all, in 1989, he was deputy national security adviser under President George H.W. Bush when the key decisions were made to continue covert U.S. aid to the mujahedeen, not cut it off.

The truth was that the end game in Afghanistan was messed up not because the United States cut the mujahedeen off but because Washington pressed for a clear-cut victory, rebuffing Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev's proposals for a power-sharing arrangement. And we know that Gates knows this reality because he recounted it in his 1996 memoir, *From the Shadows*.

The Real History

Here's what that history actually shows: In 1988, Gorbachev promised to remove Soviet troops from Afghanistan and sought a negotiated settlement. He hoped for a unity government that would include elements of Afghan President Najibullah's Soviet-backed regime in Kabul and the CIA-backed Islamic fundamentalist rebels.

Gates, who in 1988 was deputy CIA director, opposed Gorbachev's plan, disbelieving that the Soviets would really depart and insisting that if they did the CIA's mujahedeen could quickly defeat Najibullah's army.

Inside the Reagan administration, Gates's judgment was opposed by State Department analysts who foresaw a drawn-out struggle. Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead and the department's intelligence chief Morton Abramowitz warned that Najibullah's army might hold on longer than the CIA expected.

But Gates prevailed in the policy debates, pushing the CIA's faith in its mujahedeen clients and expecting a rapid Najibullah collapse if the Soviets left. In the memoir, Gates recalled briefing Secretary of State George Shultz and his senior aides on the CIA's predictions prior to Shultz flying to Moscow in February 1988.

"I told them that most [CIA] analysts did not believe Najibullah's government could last without active Soviet military support," wrote Gates.

After the Soviets did withdraw in February 1989 proving Gates wrong on that point some U.S. officials felt Washington's geostrategic aims had been achieved and a move toward peace was in order. There also was mounting concern about the Afghan mujahedeen, especially their tendencies toward brutality, heroin trafficking and fundamentalist religious practices.

However, the new administration of George H.W. Bush with Gates moving from the CIA to the White House as deputy national security adviser rebuffed Gorbachev and chose to continue U.S. covert support for the mujahedeen, aid which was being funneled primarily through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency, the ISI.

At the time, I was a Newsweek national security correspondent and asked my CIA contacts why the U.S. government didn't just collect its winnings from the

Soviet withdrawal and agree to some kind of national-unity government in Kabul that could end the war and bring some stability to the country. One of the CIA hardliners responded to my question with disgust. "We want to see Najibullah strung up by a light pole," he snarled.

Back in Afghanistan, Najibullah's regime defied the CIA's expectation of a rapid collapse, using Soviet weapons and advisers to beat back a mujahedeen offensive in 1990. As Najibullah hung on, the war, the violence and the disorder continued.

Gates finally recognized that his CIA analysis had been wrong. In his memoir, he wrote: "As it turned out, Whitehead and Abramowitz were right" in their warning that Najibullah's regime might not fall quickly. Gates's memoir also acknowledged that the U.S. government did *not* abandon Afghanistan immediately after the Soviet departure.

"Najibullah would remain in power for another three years [after the Soviet pull-out], as the United States and the USSR continued to aid their respective sides," Gates wrote. Indeed, Moscow's and Washington's supplies continued to flow until several months after the Soviet Union collapsed in summer 1991, according to Gates.

Crile's Account

And other U.S. assistance continued even longer, according to Crile's *Charlie Wilson's War*. In the book, Crile described how Wilson kept the funding spigot open for the Afghan rebels not only after the Soviet departure in 1989 but even after the Soviet Union disintegrated in 1991.

Eventually, the mujahedeen did capture the strategic city of Khost, but turned it into a ghost town as civilians fled or faced the mujahedeen's fundamentalist fury. Western aid workers found themselves "following the liberators in a desperate attempt to persuade them not to murder and pillage," Crile wrote.

U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan Robert Oakley began to wonder who were the worse bad guys, the Soviet-backed communists or the U.S.-supported mujahedeen.

"It was the leaders of the Afghan puppet government who were saying all the right things, even paying lip service to democratic change," Crile reported. "The mujahideen, on the other hand, were committing unspeakable atrocities and couldn't even put aside their bickering and murderous thoughts long enough to capture Kabul."

In 1991, as the Soviet Union careened toward its final crackup, the Senate Intelligence Committee approved nothing for Afghanistan, Crile wrote. "But no

one could just turn off Charlie Wilson's war like that," Crile noted. "For Charlie Wilson, there was something fundamentally wrong with his war ending then and there. He didn't like the idea of the United States going out with a whimper."

Wilson made an impassioned appeal to the House Intelligence Committee and carried the day. The committee first considered a \$100 million annual appropriation, but Wilson got them to boost it to \$200 million, which with the Saudi matching funds totaled \$400 million, Crile reported.

"And so, as the mujahideen were poised for their thirteenth year of war, instead of being cut off, it turned out to be a banner year," Crile wrote. "They found themselves with not only a \$400 million budget but also with a cornucopia of new weaponry sources that opened up when the United States decided to send the Iraqi weapons captured during the Gulf War to the mujahideen."

But even then the Afghan rebels needed an external event to prevail on the battlefield, the stunning disintegration of the Soviet Union in the latter half of 1991. Only then did Moscow cut off its aid to Najibullah. His government finally fell in 1992. But its collapse didn't stop the war or the mujahideen infighting.

The capital of Kabul came under the control of a relatively moderate rebel force led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, an Islamist but not a fanatic. However, Massoud, a Tajik, was not favored by Pakistan's ISI, which backed more extreme Pashtun elements of the mujahideen.

Rival Afghan warlords battled with each other for another four years destroying much of Kabul. Finally, a disgusted Washington began to turn away. Crile reported that the Cross Border Humanitarian Aid Program, which was the only sustained U.S. program aimed at rebuilding Afghanistan, was cut off at the end of 1993, almost five years after the Soviets left.

Rise of the Taliban

While chaos continued to reign across Afghanistan, the ISI readied its own army of Islamic extremists drawn from Pashtun refugee camps inside Pakistan. This group, known as the Taliban, entered Afghanistan with the promise of restoring order.

The Taliban seized the capital of Kabul in September 1996, driving Massoud into a northward retreat. The ousted communist leader Najibullah, who had stayed in Kabul, sought shelter in the United Nations compound, but was captured. The Taliban tortured, castrated and killed him, his mutilated body hung from a light pole just as the CIA hardliner had wished seven years earlier.

The triumphant Taliban imposed harsh Islamic law on Afghanistan. Their rule was especially cruel to women who had made gains toward equal rights under the communists, but were forced by the Taliban to live under highly restrictive rules, to cover themselves when in public, and to forgo schooling.

The Taliban also granted refuge to Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, who had fought with the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviets in the 1980s. Bin Laden then used Afghanistan as the base of operations for his terrorist organization, al-Qaeda, setting the stage for the next Afghan War in 2001.

So, the real history is quite different from the Hollywood version that Official Washington has absorbed as its short-hand understanding of the anti-Soviet Afghan war of the 1980s.

The newly discovered document about bringing Charlie Wilson into the White House “circle as discrete Hill connection” suggests that even the impression that it was “Charlie Wilson’s War” may have been more illusion than reality. Though Wilson surely became a true believer in the CIA’s largest covert action of the Cold War, Reagan’s White House team appears to have viewed him as a useful Democratic front man who would be “very helpful in getting money.”

Most significantly, the mythology enshrined in the movie and embraced by the policymakers obscured the key lessons of the 1980s: the dangerous futility of trying to impose a Western or military solution on Afghanistan as well as the need to explore negotiation and compromise even when dealing with unsavory foes. It wasn’t the mythical U.S. “abandonment” of Afghanistan in February 1989 that caused the devastation of the past two decades, but rather the uncompromising policies of the Reagan-Bush-41 administrations.

First, there was the ascendance of propaganda over truth. The U.S. government was well aware of the gross human rights crimes of the Afghan “muj” but still sold them as honorable “freedomfighters” to the American people. Second, there was the triumphalism of Gates and other war hawks, who insisted on rubbing Moscow’s nose in its Afghan defeat and thus blocked cooperation on a negotiated settlement which held out the promise of a less destructive outcome.

Those two factors the deceit and the hubris set the stage for the 9/11 attacks in 2001, a renewed Afghan War bogging down tens of thousands of U.S. troops, America’s disastrous detour into Iraq, and now a costly long-term U.S. commitment to Afghanistan that is expected to last at least until 2024. With a distorted account of “Charlie Wilson’s War,” Tom Hanks and Hollywood didn’t help.

[For a limited time, you can purchase Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush family

for only \$34. For details, [click here.](#)]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
