

Trump Uses Tiny Nation to Insult Russia

In another affront to Russia, President Trump has signed onto Montenegro's entrance into NATO, as the neocon/liberal-hawk strategy of encircling Russia resumes, writes Ted Snider.

By Ted Snider

Donald Trump has just approved Montenegro's accession into NATO, the latest sign that hopes for a new détente with Russia have been dashed. Though Montenegro is a tiny nation and its inclusion doesn't significantly affect NATO's capabilities, the move does send a clear message to Moscow that Trump is continuing his reversal from his campaign promises of warming up to Russia and cooling off to NATO into the opposite.

The script got flipped, in part, because Democrats and the major U.S. news media battered Trump for months after his election with allegations portraying him as Russia's "Manchurian candidate." Despite the lack of evidence that Trump's campaign had colluded with Moscow, the steady pounding – day after day – took its toll, leading to Trump's capitulation in early April as signified by his missile strike against Syria and his new hostile rhetoric toward the Kremlin.

However, even before Trump's springtime flip-flop, his administration had been signaling that the new President wouldn't change the arc of U.S. foreign policy very much. Immediately upon assuming the role of Secretary of Defense on Jan. 20, retired Marine General James Mattis called NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to assure him of America's commitment to "the fundamental and enduring value of NATO for the security of both Europe and North America."

While they were talking, NATO was building up its forces along Russia's borders as German and Belgian troops moved into Lithuania supposedly to act as a deterrent against Russian "aggression." In mid-February, 500 U.S. troops deployed to Romania and another 120 were deployed to Bulgaria as part of the NATO operation known as Atlantic Resolve.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Alexi Meshkov, revealed Russia's interpretation of the NATO buildup when he said, "This deployment is of course a threat for us."

At the same time, 300 U.S. Marines were arriving in Norway 900 miles from the Russian border. Russia criticized the move as having no military benefit – beyond antagonizing Russia. When Norway joined NATO as a founding member, they made the commitment not to host any foreign forces because of Russian concerns

that Norway could serve as a launching ground for an attack on Russia.

At the end of January, U.S. tanks and armored vehicles – part of a 3,500-troop contingent – fired salvos into the air in Poland. General Ben Hodges, the commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, said, “this is not just a training exercise. It’s to demonstrate a strategic message that you cannot violate the sovereignty of members of NATO ... Moscow will get the message – I’m confident of it.”

Maiden Speech

Days later, Trump’s Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley used her maiden speech in the Security Council to issue a “clear and strong condemnation of Russian actions,” saying, “I consider it unfortunate that the occasion of my first appearance is one in which I must condemn the aggressive actions of Russia.”

She then added that, “The United States continues to condemn and call for an immediate end to the Russian occupation of Crimea. Crimea is a part of Ukraine. Our Crimea-related sanctions will remain in place until Russia returns control over the peninsula to Ukraine.”

By mid-February, that hardline message had moved into the White House with press secretary Sean Spicer declaring: “President Trump has made it very clear that he expects the Russian government to de-escalate violence in the Ukraine and return Crimea.” The next day, Trump took to his official organ of policy announcement, Twitter, and tweeted that Crimea was “TAKEN by Russia.”

In a recent correspondence, Richard Sakwa, professor of Russian and European politics at Kent University and the author of the upcoming book *Russia against the Rest: The Post-Cold War Crisis of World Order*, said, “The renewed confrontation between Russia and the West is not a replay of the Cold War, although many of its . . . features . . . have been revived. Competition between the Atlantic community and Russia has become entrenched as the ‘new normal’. . . . Profound shifts in global politics are taking place, reshaping the international system.”

Sakwa stressed that, since “International relations today are more perilous than at any time since 1989, . . . we need to understand the dynamics of relations between Russia and the U.S. since 1989.”

The Mouse That Roared

Thus, the significance of NATO membership for the tiny Balkan country of Montenegro, which ranks 161st in size among the world’s nations and is even

smaller than Connecticut. But Montenegro was part of the former Yugoslavia, putting it inside what Russia considers to be its sphere of influence.

There is also Russia's sensitivity about what the Kremlin viewed as a U.S. commitment not to expand NATO eastward as part of Moscow's agreement to let a united Germany join NATO.

At a Feb. 9, 1990 meeting at the Kremlin, President George H.W. Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker, promised Gorbachev that if NATO got Germany and Russia pulled 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 specifically 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.

But the logic of the specific assurance regarding East Germany implies a larger assurance regarding nations to the east of East Germany. Russia wouldn't have a security concern about East Germany being home to NATO forces if those NATO forces were moving into former Soviet Republics on Russia's borders as is happening now.

So, the question of militarizing east of Germany never had to explicitly come up: it was implicitly understood. Sakwa says, "The question of NATO enlargement to the other Soviet bloc countries simply did not enter anyone's head and was not discussed."

Then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev says it didn't come up because it was then unthinkable: "Merely the notion that NATO might expand to include the countries in this alliance sounded completely absurd at the time."

The historical record makes the meaning of the promise clear. The promise was made on two consecutive days: first by the Americans and then by the West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. According to West German foreign ministry documents, on Feb. 10, 1990, the day after James 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.'"

A few days earlier, on Jan. 31, 1990, Genscher had said in a major speech that there would not be "an expansion of NATO territory to the east, in other words, closer to the borders of the Soviet Union." This public announcement, again, made the spirit of the promise clear.

Former CIA analyst and chief of the Soviet Foreign Policy Branch Ray McGovern reports that the U.S. ambassador to the USSR at the time of the promise, Jack Matlock – who was present at the talks – told him that “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. ... I don’t see how anybody could view the subsequent expansion of NATO as anything but ‘taking advantage.’”

Matlock is referring to the words of President George H.W. Bush who clearly stated that the U.S. would not derive any “unilateral advantage” from the end of the Cold War, or, as Genscher phrased it, there would be “no shift in the balance of power” between the East and the West. As Matlock said, it is very hard to see how the absorption of the former nations of the Soviet Union is not an “advantage” or a “shift in the balance of power.”

Thumb’s Width

Gorbachev says the promise was made not to expand NATO “as much as a thumb’s width further to the east.” In 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin said, “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 then went on to remind his audience of the assurances by pointing out that the existence of the NATO promise is not just the perception of him and Gorbachev. It was also the view of the NATO General Secretary Manfred Woerner at the time: “But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr. Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. 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?”

McGovern says that when he asked Viktor Borisovich Kuvaldin, a Gorbachev adviser from 1989-1991, why there was no written agreement, Kuvaldin replied painfully, “We trusted you.”

In 1999, NATO brushed aside Russia’s protests and absorbed Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. The encroachment toward Russia’s borders continued in 2004 by adding Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. In 2009, the Russian sphere of influence was further penetrated with the NATO incursion into Albania and Croatia.

Now, accepting Montenegro into NATO has become a politically popular way for Congress to demonstrate its disdain for Vladimir Putin, even if Montenegro’s

population isn't all that enthusiastic, splitting roughly down the middle on NATO membership.

Though sometimes called "soft on Russia," Secretary of State Rex Tillerson also was cheerleading for Montenegro's admission. Then, on April 11, just days after firing 59 Tomahawk missiles at Russia's Syrian allies in retaliation for a supposed chemical weapons incident and amid White House suggestions that the Russians were complicit in the alleged war crime, Trump signed the paperwork on Montenegro's admittance.

In doing so, Trump added to NATO's encroachment on Russia's borders, dismissed Russia's claim to a sphere of influence – and made clear that his campaign promise of a less confrontational posture against Russia was a thing of the past.

Ted Snider writes on analyzing patterns in US foreign policy and history.

A Confession on Meeting a Russian

Though now billed as a "spymaster," Russian Ambassador Kislyak was well known as a social butterfly, meeting a wide range of Americans, including politicians, academics and activists, which led David Swanson to this "confession."

By David Swanson

It was August 2014. Our secret and nefarious meeting had to be disguised as a public event. So, the Russian Ambassador to the United States, Sergey Ivanovich Kislyak, spoke at the University of Virginia, in an event organized by the Center for Politics, which no doubt has video of the proceedings and was of course in on the conspiracy.

Kislyak was once ambassador to Belgium and to NATO. He served an eight-course Russian dinner for select guests prior to the public forum in an underground lair deep inside Observatory Hill.

Kislyak spoke to a packed auditorium at UVA and took, I think, well over an hour of questions. He spoke frankly, and the questions he was asked by students, professors, and other participants were polite and for the most part far more intelligent than he would have been asked on, for example, *Meet the Press*.

He told the audience that Russia had known there were no WMDs in Iraq, and had known that attacking Iraq would bring "great difficulties" to that country. "And

look what is happening today," he said. He made the same comment about Libya. He spoke of the U.S. and Russia working together to successfully remove chemical weapons from the Syrian government. But he warned against attacking Syria now.

There will be no new Cold War, Kislyak said, but there is now a greater divide in some ways than during the Cold War. Back then, he said, the U.S. Congress sent delegations over to meet with legislators, and the Supreme Court likewise. Now there is no contact. It's easy in the U.S. to be anti-Russian, he said, and hard to defend Russia. He complained about U.S. economic sanctions against Russia intended to "suffocate" Russian agriculture.

Asked about "annexing" Crimea, Kislyak rejected that characterization, pointed to the armed overthrow of the Ukrainian government and insisted that Kiev must stop bombing its own people and instead talk about federalism within Ukraine.

There were remarkably few questions put to the ambassador that seemed informed by U.S. television "news." One was from a politics professor who insisted that Kislyak assign blame to Russia over Ukraine. Kislyak didn't.

Swanson's 'Contact'

I always sit in the back, thinking I might leave, but Kislyak was only taking questions from the front. So I moved up and was finally called on for the last question of the evening. For an hour and a half, Kislyak had addressed war and peace and Russian-U.S. relations, but he'd never blamed the U.S. for anything in Ukraine any more than Russia. No one had uttered the word "NATO."

So I pointed out the then upcoming NATO protests. I recalled the history of Russia being told that NATO would not expand eastward. I asked Kislyak whether NATO ought to be disbanded.

The ambassador said that he had been the first Russian to "present his credentials" to NATO, and that he had "overestimated" NATO's ability to work with Russia. He'd been disappointed by NATO actions in Serbia, he said, and Libya, by the expansion eastward, by NATO pressure on Ukraine and Poland, and by the pretense that Russia might be about to attack Poland.

"We were promised," Kislyak said, that NATO would not expand eastward at all upon the reunification of Germany. "And now look." NATO has declared that Ukraine and Georgia will join NATO, Kislyak pointed out, and NATO says this even while a majority of the people in Ukraine say they're opposed.

The ambassador used the word "disappointed" a few times.

"We'll have to take measures to assure our defense," he said, "but we would have

preferred to build on a situation with decreased presence and decreased readiness.”

Wouldn't we all. I mean, all of us who aren't interested in risking World War III as long as it can gin up a pretense that Hillary Clinton lost because of Russian evil.

David Swanson is an author, activist, journalist, and radio host. He is director of WorldBeyondWar.org and campaign coordinator for RootsAction.org. Swanson's books include [War Is A Lie](http://WarIsALie.com). He blogs at DavidSwanson.org and WarIsACrime.org. He hosts [Talk Nation Radio](http://TalkNationRadio.com). He is a 2015, 2016, 2017 Nobel Peace Prize Nominee. Follow him on Twitter: [@davidcswanson](https://twitter.com/davidcswanson) and [FaceBook](https://www.facebook.com/davidcswanson). [This story previously appeared at <http://davidswanson.org/node/5468>]

NATO's Strange Addition of Montenegro

Exclusive: Official Washington's New Cold Warriors are painting NATO's admission of tiny Montenegro in the stark black-and-white colors of a heroic stand against "Russian aggression" but that misses the real reasons why it's a bad idea, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Any day now, Arizona [Senator John McCain promises](http://SenatorJohnMcCain.com), the U.S. Senate will [vote to approve](http://vote.to.approve) the incorporation of Montenegro as the 29th member state in the NATO alliance. Though few Americans likely know where to find the tiny Balkan nation on a map, Montenegro has become another dubious focal point of the West's new confrontation with Russia.

At first glance, the case for extending NATO's umbrella over a country with fewer than 2,000 troops isn't obvious. Its seven helicopters are unlikely to make America safer. The Obama administration, which championed this latest in a long line of recent additions to the alliance, actually [offered as a rationale](http://offered.as.a.rationale) the fact that Montenegro had donated some mortar rounds to the anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq and \$1.2 million to NATO's operations in Afghanistan over three years.

That sum is [less than a third of what U.S. taxpayers spend in Afghanistan per hour](http://less.than.a.third.of.what.U.S.taxpayers.spend.in.Afghanistan.per.hour). One critic quipped, "if the West's survival depends on Montenegro's inclusion in NATO, we should all be heading for the bunkers."

Maybe that's why hawks are citing the mere fact of Russia's predictable

opposition as a prime reason to support Montenegro's accession. "Backing Montenegro's membership is not only the right thing for the Senate to do, it would send a clear signal that no third party has a veto over NATO enlargement decisions," argues the Heritage Foundation.

And two advocates at the John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, declared recently that Montenegro will be the key test of whether President Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson "kowitz to their friend Russian President Vladimir Putin" and "acquiesce . . . in another Yalta" or stand up for "core U.S. goals."

Raising the specter of Putin and Yalta diverts attention from troubling questions about Montenegro's political suitability as a partner – and whether it has anything of military value to offer.

NATO ostensibly conditions its acceptance of new members on strict criteria, which include "demonstrating a commitment to the rule of law and human rights; establishing democratic control of armed forces; and promoting stability and well-being through economic liberty, social justice and environmental responsibility."

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Carpenter assured the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last September that Montenegro supported NATO's "values of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law." He must have missed the report from Freedom House, which gave the country a rating of only "partly free" for both political rights and civil liberties.

The organization cited "restrictions on the freedom of peaceful assembly" and "years of harassment and discrimination against LGBT people." It also noted "ongoing concerns . . . about the independence of the judiciary and the public broadcaster, as well as numerous failures to effectively prosecute past attacks against media workers." The country suffers from "a lack of trust in the electoral process among voters," it added.

Carpenter must also have missed the State Department's human rights report, which accused Montenegro of numerous violations, including "impunity for war crimes, mistreatment by law enforcement officers of persons in their custody, overcrowded and dilapidated prisons and pretrial detention facilities, violations of the right to peaceful assembly," and "selective prosecution of political and societal opponents."

A Bastion of Corruption

As for the "rule of law," consider that Montenegro's ruler for nearly three decades, Milo Djukanović, was given the 2015 Organized Crime and Corruption

“Person of the Year” Award by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), an organization of several hundred investigative journalists who report on corruption in Europe and Central Asia (and are partly financed by USAID).

Citing his success in “creating an oppressive political atmosphere and an economy choked by corruption and money laundering,” the OCCRP said Djukanovi? “has built one of the most dedicated kleptocracies and organized crime havens in the world.”

The organization pointed to his alleged role in cigarette smuggling with notorious Italian crime syndicates; his family’s takeover of a former state bank, which became a money laundry for organized crime; his controversial sale of major stretches of the country’s coastline to shady foreign oligarchs; and his offer of citizenship to a notorious regional drug kingpin.

Djukanovi? knows the money is greener to the west of Montenegro than to the east. That’s why he’s an ardent advocate of joining NATO. (Fewer than 40 percent of Montenegrins in a recent poll agreed – in part because alliance warplanes bombed the country during NATO’s campaign against Serbia in 1999.) President Obama congratulated Djukanovi? on his stand during an official reception in September.

Following national elections in October, Djukanovi? finally stepped down as prime minister, but he remains head of the ruling party. Taking his place as the country’s current prime minister was his hand-picked deputy, Dusko Markovic.

“Markovic, a former state security chief, is considered one of Djukanovi?’s closest confidantes,” reported OCCRP. “He was publicly accused by a former head of the country’s anti-organized crime police last year of involvement in cigarette smuggling, but was never charged.” In 2014, Markovic was also charged by the head of a government investigative commission with obstructing a probe into the murder of a prominent newspaper editor and critic of Djukanovi?.

Western media have large ignored such troubling facts. Instead, what little coverage there is of Montenegro focuses on the government’s sensational claim that Russians plotted to assassinate Djukanovi? at the time of the October election.

Markovic recently told Time magazine that his security services at the last minute uncovered a “criminal organization” formed by two Russian military intelligence agents, who planned on election day “to provoke incidents . . . and also possibly an armed conflict” as a pretext for taking power.

The prosecutor in charge of the case says “Russian state authorities” backed the

plot to “prevent Montenegro from joining NATO.” He vows to indict two alleged Russian plotters and 22 others, including a group of Serbian nationalists, by April 15. Russia’s foreign minister called the allegations “baseless,” but refuses to extradite any suspects. An independent expert, citing numerous anomalies in the official story, argues the plot was a “rogue operation” by Serbian and Russian nationalist freelancers.

Russia, which has long considered the Balkans to be in its sphere of influence, has a history of intruding in Montenegro’s affairs. But absent persuasive supporting evidence for the government’s case, outsiders should bear in mind the cautionary observation by Freedom House that “[Montenegro’s] intelligence service has faced sustained criticism from international observers for a perceived lack of professionalism.”

Still, it should come as no surprise that anti-Russia hawks haven’t let ambiguous evidence deter them from demanding the expansion of NATO.

A *Wall Street Journal* editorial said the alleged coup plot “gives a good taste of Russia’s ambitions – and methods – in Eastern and Central Europe” and concluded with a call for accepting Montenegro’s bid to join NATO: “Western security is best served by supporting democratic governments of any size facing pressure from regional bullies. The alternative is to deliver another country into Moscow’s grip, and whet its appetite to take another.”

Time magazine commented even more breathlessly that “The aborted coup was a reminder that a new battle for Europe has begun. From the Baltics to the Balkans and the Black Sea to Great Britain, Vladimir Putin is seeking to rebuild Russia’s empire more than 25 years after the fall of the Soviet Union.” Trump’s past criticism of NATO, the magazine warned, has “raised flags that the U.S. might accept Russia’s territorial grab.”

Such inflammatory comments are stoking the political fires burning around Trump, including investigations of his campaign contacts with Russians, assertions of Moscow’s interference with the election, and questions about business connections or personal indiscretions that make him vulnerable to Putin. Trump’s stand on Montenegro – still to be determined – will signal whether he remains a critic of NATO or is caving to the New Cold Warriors.

Jonathan Marshall is author of many recent articles on arms issues, including “Obama’s Unkept Promise on Nuclear War,” “How World War III Could Start,” “NATO’s Provocative Anti-Russian Moves,” “Escalations in a New Cold War,” and “Ticking Closer to Midnight.”

Where Donald Trump Makes Sense

Many progressives so despise Donald Trump that they decry all his positions even those that make some sense, such as questioning NATO and the dangerous New Cold War with Russia, as ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller explains.

By Graham E. Fuller

With the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States, it's hard to know where first to focus attention. Rage and righteous indignation on all sides are mounting. There is more than enough blame to go around for how the U.S. got itself into this situation. Where it will all go from here is beyond the imagination of the most lurid screenwriters of White House dramas.

Whatever the outrage *du jour* may be, we must not forget that history didn't begin with the 2015-2016 presidential campaign/circus. To believe that is analytically lazy, an easy cop-out, even self-serving. Major elements of these deep domestic pathologies trace back at a minimum to America's fateful actions from the very beginning of this disastrous American Twenty-first Century.

It was in 2000 that the Supreme Court, in an act of sheer partisanship, threw the contested Florida election to George W. Bush. This "decision" did two things: it demonstrated that the politicization of the Supreme Court had now touched the very pinnacle of the U.S. political order. The Court's reputation would never recover from the event.

Second, it enraged many Democrats who felt that the election had been stolen from Al Gore, thereby tainting the presidency of George W. Bush from the outset. Bush's incompetence, ignorance, and domination by dark neocon forces led us into a series of desperate wars in the Middle East that shaped the region down to this day – the Global War on Terror, the collapse of Iraq, Libya, Yemen, an Afghanistan on the ropes, the creation of ISIS on the smoking ruins of Iraq's civil struggle and to the beginning of the Syrian agony whose impact has massively shaken even Europe, and pushed the nature of U.S.-Russian relations towards resuscitation of the Cold War.

Unlike other nations that have undergone terrorist cataclysms but succeeded in rising above it, the United States never survived the psychological shock of 9/11. It is still living with it. U.S. obsession with domestic security – in one of the world's safer environments – even invented a new, Teutonic-sounding word "Homeland" to celebrate the birth of the security state; it also raised the

corrosive specter of the “Muslim Other” in our midst.

It was this event that spurred Washington to massively expand the size and number of existing security and intelligence organizations, and create vast multiple layers of new ones. We see how they now compete and stumble around against each other; their very unmanageable size has arguably contributed to an overall deterioration in the quality of U.S. intelligence. A sober grip on the trajectories of world forces seems quite beyond Washington’s ken.

Whatever Donald Trump may think about the CIA – and how legitimate any of his perceptions may or may not be – his dissatisfaction is not entirely out of place; it would be prudent for him to undertake a close, zero-based review of the entire massive and redundant national security structure. More is not better; bigger is not better. The national security structure would be leaner, meaner, and more efficient were it immediately slashed by 50 percent at the outset.

All organizations work hard to preserve their individual corporate fiefdoms; when does a bureaucracy voluntarily ever downsize? Better intelligence is no longer even the real dynamic at work; institutional self-preservation is.

Militarized Foreign Policy

The militarization of American foreign policy grew special wings under the Global War on Terror. It is little wonder that so many of the key senior positions in the Trump cabinet and the White House are now being filled by military men: National Security Advisor, CIA chief, Director of National Intelligence, the NSA, the Secretary of Defense, etc. We narrowly missed a military Secretary of State.

This is not to say that the military cannot produce significant competence at the top, but again the problem with the military – and a military budget that surpasses most of the rest of the world combined – has led to securitization and militarization of foreign policy. Defense trumps State every time. Global threats expand to meet and justify the military budget; military solutions become default approaches to world issues. Where would we be without our threats?

The new national security state has promoted the most dangerous security idea of all – the idea that international security is a zero-sum game; that among great powers everything takes on the character of a win-lose confrontation. Our think tanks earnestly scour the globe for “coming threats.” (I know, I’ve written many of them in my day.)

We cannot contemplate such a thing as a win-win relationship among great powers.

Of course the massive resources consumed by the U.S. military (think of the staggering lost opportunity costs) are powerfully backed by the military-industrial complex that President Eisenhower presciently warned us about half a century ago.

Now, coming to today's real third-rail topic: Russia. The obsessive – virtually hysterical – narrative of Russia in U.S. domestic politics today is not really about a true threat to the national security. Russia hasn't done anything that we don't routinely do to ourselves (and others). Hacking abounds, it is the new growth industry.

"Blame Russia" instead is a convenient joint project for several unexpected bed-fellows: Clinton Democrats, embittered by Hillary's defeat, seeking a scapegoat; Democrats who may detest Trump for quite understandable reasons, and seek to fully delegitimize his presidency at any cost and to refuse any constructive cooperation. What better device than to label him a Russian agent. End of discussion.

In addition, we have the military-industrial-security complex viscerally opposed to any kind of rapprochement with Moscow or talks with Putin; it's simply bad for business. By all means investigate the Russians. But that is not basically why our nation is in a fix.

We are talking of sacred cows here. NATO is perceived as a God-given good in itself. Yet there are plenty of good, rational reasons for rethinking the place of NATO in the world. Try [the views](#) of the seasoned, beady-eyed conservative geopolitician George Friedman who does exactly that. Or my more [critical blog](#) of last July.

It constitutes neither treason nor ignorance to reconsider these foundations of our future place in a world that no longer resembles that of NATO's founding. And of course by now NATO has its own priority of deeply-rooted institutional self-preservation at any cost, through promotion of ranges of new missions designed expressly to preserve its role. Serious debate with Europe about what NATO should and should not be is urgently due, but any such rational debate is not to be found in Washington, on this or so many other global strategy issues.

And finally, however emotionally satisfying, where does de-legitimization of the president take us? Rejection of the (highly flawed) electoral system entirely? Good luck at changing it. And who has the right to determine "legitimacy"? Our partisan Supreme Court? Determined citizens? This all represents exceptionally dangerous ground indeed. We've been down this de-legitimization route now against George W. Bush and Barack Obama (for differing reasons), and now Trump. It gets uglier with each iteration, but also exceedingly more dangerous to the

nation as more and more people join the ranks of “he’s not my president.”

Draining the Swamp?

Trump’s promise to “drain the swamp” in Washington had some allure during the primaries. The swamp goes back decades. Yet very little draining has yet taken place; instead we have a celebration of plutocracy in power as never before.

Money in politics has simply moved yet one further step up the rung, now foreshadowing a permanent future American corporatist governing structure. This deep, corrosive, bald presence of money in politics has grown by leaps and bounds in this century; no need to go to election 2016 to start bemoaning it.

It is self-deception if we let the coarseness of the Trump image lead us away from the thought that it has ever been much different. And the 90 percent left behind this time will be the chief victims of oppression, poor health, prejudice, discrimination.

The U.S. does not even seem capable of governing itself at this point, and the fault lines are sharpening. The specter of domestic political violence can hardly be excluded in this swirl of personalized politics of black hats and white hats. There is no debate, only vituperation, slander, vilification and demonization.

Drastic failures in U.S. foreign policies going back at least to 2000 have raised ongoing serious doubts in the eyes of the world about U.S. “leadership.” More and more countries, friends and rivals, are moving into damage limitation mode in dealing with us; their main task is to prevent the U.S. from dragging the rest of the world into dangerous confrontation.

Like so many others, I too am deeply disturbed at Trump’s style, manner, impulses, psychology, and policy preferences. Worse perhaps are their translation into dismaying top personnel choices. Trump himself may not be an ideologue but his appointments mostly are.

But don’t let the grossness of the immediate Trump symbol lead us to overlook the degree to which most of this goes back many, many years, and we all had a hand in it in one way or another.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is “Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American’s crisis of conscience in Pakistan.” (Amazon, Kindle)

grahamefuller.com

Dreaming Up a Reason for NATO's Relevance

European leaders still rattle their tiny sabers at Russia, but Donald Trump's election has spread confusion across NATO nations that had dutifully climbed aboard the New Cold War express, says ex-British intelligence officer Annie Machon.

By Annie Machon

A few months ago during the seemingly endless U.S. election, Donald Trump said NATO is not a gift that America can keep giving. In his stated view, the other member states should make a greater financial contribution (the U.S. currently contributes 70 percent of NATO's budget) and, if not, they could not expect automatic protection in the face of an attack.

On Nov. 13, after Trump's victory, NATO Secretary General and former Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg wrote a think piece in the U.K.'s *Observer* newspaper, and acknowledged the need for more widespread contributions while crying up the historic importance and future need for NATO by citing growing Russian "assertiveness" (diplo-speak for "aggression") and the threat from international terrorism.

I was invited onto RT to analyze this and am here expanding on some of the points I made in an always-all-too-brief interview.

Stoltenberg was right to acknowledge Trump's concerns about the contributions to NATO. But I think he was also addressing another and already-serving president somewhat closer to home – head of the European Commission and totemic Eurocrat Jean-Claude Juncker – who for a while now has been plotting an integrated European Union army and who ramped up the rhetoric last week after Trump's victory. The head of NATO is naturally not going to be too happy that the E.U. is poaching on his territory as the supposed military defender of Europe.

It was also reported in *The Observer* that France and Germany are planning to announce the acceleration towards an E.U. army over the coming weeks. So much for European-wide consensus. It would appear that Juncker also sees this as a bargaining position in future Brexit negotiations, if Britain ever does get around to triggering Article 50 for withdrawing from the E.U. Any E.U. army would need the U.K.'s contribution – not just the armed forces, which are the second largest in the E.U., but also continued close cooperation with the

intelligence agencies.

After all, if both the U.K. post-Brexit and the U.S. after the ascension of Trump become increasingly isolationist and isolated, it would be natural for the two countries to pivot towards each other to the increasing exclusion of Europe. The U.K./U.S. "special relationship" has always been heavily predicated on the uniquely close working relationship of their spies, and the E.U. will fear being left further out in the cold.

So, if Juncker carries on regardless with his vanity E.U. army project and Britain agrees to contribute post-Brexit, there may be other sweet deals to offer to the U.K. during the Brexit negotiations. At least, that seems to be the position that Juncker is oiling his way towards. But the fundamental question has to be asked: why, now, do we need either a New Model E.U. army or the cavalier NATO?

Stoltenberg tried to address this in his article: "In the last few years we have seen a dramatic deterioration of our security, with a more assertive Russia and turmoil across north Africa and the Middle East. Nato allies have responded together. We have implemented the biggest reinforcement of our collective defence since the cold war. [...] This is deterrence, not aggression. [...] Nato also continues to play a crucial role in the fight against terrorism. Every Nato ally is part of the US-led coalition against Islamic State."

The Dubious Group Think

Let us unpack these comments. Firstly, is Russia indeed becoming more of a military threat, or is this just so much diplomatic grandstanding? After all, is it Russia or NATO that has been more, umm, "assertive" over the last 27 years?

In answer, I refer you back to an article I wrote two years ago after the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Referencing the work of former senior CIA officer and fellow Sam Adams Associate, Ray McGovern, it made clear that a deal was made between the Soviet Union of the time and the U.S. – and that, in return for the withdrawal of 260,000 Soviet troops from East Germany and the reunification of Germany, NATO would not move one inch further east than the German border.

Well, today we can see the result of these negotiations – another 12 countries, most in Eastern Europe and right up to the Russian border, have been assimilated into NATO. Recently within most of these border countries large-scale military exercises have been provocatively and publicly staged, plus missile "defense" systems have been planted in the fertile paranoiac soil of an increasingly aggressive and nationalistic Poland.

Yes, Russia has in retaliation been conducting its own border exercises. The leadership has to be seen to be doing something, otherwise it will appear weak and not protecting its own people. That might be “assertive,” but it’s certainly not “aggressive.”

Nor let us forget the fact that, in 2008, NATO was warm towards the idea of Ukraine and Georgia joining, provided they could meet a few conditions. This would be taking Western forces directly into Russia’s backyard. It would be encircling Russia’s border with the rest of Europe with a new “Iron Curtain.” And I have to say that **IS** is an aggressively political move at the very least.

How did this play out? Well, first stop for the campaign of Russian demonization was Georgia, under Western neocon puppet President Mikhail Saakashvili , invading a small and ethnically Russian segment of Georgia, South Ossetia. Russia responded by protecting the population, and then was excoriated across the Western world as conducting an unprovoked invasion of Georgia. This myth has long been exposed factually, but it is the hysterical headlines of the time that residually stick in most people’s minds.

Similarly in Ukraine. In 2014, a coup against the elected head of state, Viktor Yanukovich, apparently partly orchestrated by the U.S. as we know from an intercepted call between the Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for Europe Victoria Nuland and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt. Interestingly, it was Yanukovich who blocked Ukraine’s accession to NATO after his election in 2010, perhaps an additional motivation for the 2014 coup.

All this laid bare the fact that the U.S. had pumped \$5 billion in to subvert the Ukrainian state during the post-Soviet years and that, in the face of European concern about the worsening crisis, the U.S. pronounced – in the tender words of Victoria Nuland – “fuck the E.U.” And yet still the E.U. acquiesced to U.S.-led sanctions against Russia that have hit the E.U. economy hard.

Pot and Kettle

Despite this history of interference in the politics of other nations, the U.S. government accused Russia of meddling in the 2016 presidential elections. The old story of the pot and kettle springs to mind.

Add to this a probably NATO-approved strike on a Russian jet involved in the Syrian conflict earlier this year by NATO member Turkey (at the time one of the closest trading partners of Russia and which, temporarily, caused bilateral damage that has since been repaired) and the military wing of Western interests is not exactly coming up smelling of roses. (The Russian pilot bailed out but was then shot to death by Turkish-backed Syrian rebels on the ground.) Perhaps

NATO was just being “assertive.”

So to Stoltenberg’s second point of justification for NATO: the success that it has had combating the threat of international terrorism. Where can I start with this? Since NATO invoked Article 5 (when one state is attacked, all must respond) in the wake of the 9/11 attacks against America, Western countries have been dragged into war after illegal war across the Middle East, central Asia and North Africa.

Let us examine the roll call of successes: Afghanistan (now largely back in the hands of Taliban warlords and supplying ever more heroin to the illegal drug trade that goes toward funding terrorist groups, including ISIS); Iraq, now a basket case and the cradle of ISIS; Libya ditto plus the drugs; Yemeni communities being vaporized with “precision” bombs by U.S. proxy Saudi Arabia; and the bloody catastrophe of Syria of course.

So the NATO Secretary General’s second justification of the organization’s continued existence is not exactly what one would call compelling. But I suppose he had to try, when Juncker’s threatened *folie de grandeur* that is the E.U. army is even less inspiring.

So, back to President-elect Donald Trump. What will he do, faced with this mess of competing Western military/security interests and Euro-bureaucrat careerists? Perhaps his U.S. isolationist position is not so mad, bad and dangerous as the wailings of the Western liberal press would have us believe?

American “exceptionalism” and NATO interventionism have not exactly benefited much of the world since the end of the Cold War. Perhaps the time has indeed come for an American Commander-in-Chief who can indeed cut deals to cut through the saber-rattling rhetoric and, even unintentionally, make a significant contribution to world peace.

Stranger things have happened. After all, outgoing President Obama won the Nobel Peace Prize a mere eight months after his inauguration, more a hoped-for aspiration than a recognition of any accomplishment, and we see how that worked out.

Annie Machon is a former intelligence officer in the UK’s MI5 Security Service (the U.S. counterpart is the FBI).

Russia's Very Different Reality

Special Report: The demonization of Russian President Putin and Russia, in general, has reached alarming levels in the West with a new “group think” taking hold that ignores Russian realities and interests, writes Natylie Baldwin.

By Natylie Baldwin

In February, the Obama administration announced that it was quadrupling funding for a major increase in NATO troops and weaponry in the countries of Eastern Europe on the border with Russia. Diplomatic relations have faltered between the two countries over Syria.

And the corporate media in the U.S. and U.K. have again stepped up their demonization of all things Vladimir Putin – he’s corrupt, he personally orders hits on people, is facilitating war crimes in Aleppo, and wants to invade Europe. The media also pushes the idea that Russia is an uncivilized and backwards cesspit.

Considering that Russia is a nuclear superpower, the largest country geographically in the world, and is the sixth largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity (and projected to be number six in 2021 in terms of GDP), the U.S. relationship with Russia is one of the most important and delicate.

In order to have any chance of conducting this relationship in a rational manner, an accurate and nuanced understanding of the country itself and the history of post-Soviet U.S.-Russia relations is essential. This requires cutting through the misinformation and distortion that saturates much of our mainstream news and political discourse.

It’s important to keep in mind that Russia has a 1,000-year history of authoritarian rule and only started its climb out in the late 1980s. It is a transitional society, with elements of both authoritarianism and democracy. Putin, along with Dmitri Medvedev and Mikhail Gorbachev, is the least authoritarian leader that Russia has ever had.

Considering that the U.S. has supposedly been an established democracy for over 200 years, we Americans should consider a few significant problems we still have in order to gain some perspective. Only 55 years ago, African-Americans could not vote and could even be murdered with impunity in many parts of the country.

Today, we have an epidemic of militarized police officers who are shooting first and asking questions later; more and more people on death row are turning out to

be innocent; rising inequality threatens our stability; and, a system of deep corruption in terms of campaign financing has compromised our democracy – corruption that is so profound that two political science academics have recently quantified the ways in which we are now officially an oligarchy.

Is this any better than Russia's corruption because it has been folded into our legal system? We certainly have our own "oligarchs" in the form of the Koch brothers, Bill Gates, and the Walton family. Perhaps we can concede that it's not very useful to beat on Russia for not being Switzerland after only 25 years.

Russian Sentiment

A recent poll by the independent Levada Center revealed that 66 percent of Russians feel free and 68 percent don't believe it is likely that Russia will revert back to dictatorship. To understand why Russians may see themselves as fairly free, it is important to understand not only their history of authoritarian rule but also some facts and observations about Russia that run counter to the narrative often presented in our mainstream corporate media, which is owned by those same oligarchs that have captured our political system.

When I visited Russia last autumn, one of the first things I observed was that the police in both Moscow and St. Petersburg did not carry guns, only batons. I asked some Russians about this and was told that if an officer had a special assignment, he/she might carry a gun but that generally they did not. This is not consistent with the characterization that most Americans have about Russia being a police state or autocracy.

Speaking of guns, Russian citizens have to abide by much stricter gun control laws than in the U.S. These include the requirement for gun owners to obtain a five-year renewable license. Before the first license is issued, attendance in a firearms safety class and the passing of a federal safety exam is required as well as a background check.

One example of how the Russian gun control laws have helped to prevent the deadly types of mass shootings seen in the U.S. is the hate crime against patrons of a gay club in Yekaterinburg that occurred shortly after the Orlando massacre. Due to the fact that Russians don't easily have access to (illegal) assault weapons, no deaths occurred as a consequence of the violence perpetrated against the patrons by a group of Russian hoodlums who only had small, pneumatic weapons.

Russia has also had a moratorium on the death penalty since 1999 and its high court has upheld it, while Putin has publicly supported it, even in the face of popular sentiment for bringing back executions for certain crimes. Russia's

murder rate is still higher than the U.S., but it is important to understand that there is a pattern of major improvement since the Wild West days of the 1990s when journalists who covered Russia, like Angus Roxburgh, acknowledged that people being gunned down in the streets of Moscow was reminiscent of an episode of *The Untouchables* and was a fairly regular occurrence.

In my visit last year, another woman and I traveled together and encountered no problems or threats, even when we walked from the Metro station to our hotel after dark in Moscow. I felt no less safe than I feel walking around after dark near where I work in San Francisco.

Although the visa application to travel to Russia is more stringent than for other European countries, I traveled freely when I was there, took photos wherever I wanted, and went through a similar airport security procedure as in the U.S. The vast majority of people I encountered in Russia were friendly, curious or neutral.

Recession and Resilience

While Russia has suffered from a recession since 2014 and has seen economic gains for its population suspended since the combination of low oil prices and sanctions, there was plenty of food in the markets and people said that the main hardship was inflation, though that has been coming down and is now at an annualized rate of 6.9 percent. The import substitution policies have shown success in the agricultural sector and are just starting to show promise in the industrial sector.

The sense I got from the Russians whom I spoke with was that they'd weather this storm and come out stronger and wiser for it – as they'd had to do in far worse conditions in their history. In spite of the recession, people generally looked healthy, were dressed in Western attire, and young people had their smartphones. In many ways, these people looked indistinguishable from those you'd see in any American city or suburb.

Prior to this economic downturn, Russia had enjoyed consistent increases in quality of life after “the lost weekend” of massive poverty, crime and exploding mortality rates that the Russian people had suffered during the Yeltsin years – giving Boris Yeltsin the distinction of being the least popular leader among Russians of the last 100 years.

As Victor Kramarenko, an engineer and foreign trade relations specialist during the Soviet period and, more recently, a years-long executive with a major American corporation in Moscow, summed up the Yeltsin era: “The Russian economy

was devastated. We went from being an industrial power that defeated the Nazis, showed resilience, rebuilt quickly, and had great achievements in aviation and space to a place where morale collapsed and a lack of trust and a pirate mentality emerged.”

Why Is Putin Popular?

The devastation of the Yeltsin era was the state of the nation when Vladimir Putin took the helm in 2000. Having to navigate among ruthless oligarchic clans that Yeltsin had left behind, with no political party to support him and a very real possibility of overthrow or assassination if he wasn't careful, Putin began to surround himself with people he'd trusted throughout his career. This included, among others, some people from the security services.

As for the epithet that “once a KGB man, always a KGB man,” Putin was actually not some James Bond-style assassin during his time with the spy agency. He served as a mid-level analyst in Dresden for the bulk of his career. Upon his return to Moscow from East Germany in 1990, he turned down a promotion to the agency's foreign intelligence operations division, opting to re-settle his family in St. Petersburg instead. His increasing dissatisfaction eventually led him to resign from the KGB.

Putin then went to work as a foreign affairs adviser to Anatoly Sobchak in May of 1990. Sobchak, a professor of economic law at Leningrad State University, had emerged in the Gorbachev era as a popular democratic reformer and major critic of the KGB's abuses. He had just been elected Chairman of the Leningrad City Council.

The following year Sobchak became mayor and appointed Putin as his deputy. According to Allen C. Lynch in his scholarly 2011 political biography, *Vladimir Putin and Russian Statecraft*, in this position, Putin coordinated relations with the military, police, district attorney, customs officials and NGO's and handled diplomatic matters.

In the six years he served in this capacity, Putin had many impressive achievements, including attracting several Western corporations to the city, signing thousands of joint ventures with foreign companies, establishing a substantial foreign banking presence, legalizing the sale of land, allowing for free privatization of residential property, opening an international trade center, and strengthening municipal banks – which contributed to their remaining solvent in the face of the 1998 financial meltdown.

During the 1991 attempted coup against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, Putin found out that the Leningrad KGB, which supported the coup, planned to arrest

Sobchak when he returned to the airport from out of town. Putin quickly gathered a group of trusted men and rode straight up to the plane to protect his boss, a challenge the local KGB chose not to press.

The Corruption Claims

Despite Western assertions of Putin's corruption, with questionable evidence to support these charges, there is evidence pointing in a very different direction about Putin's honesty. Sharon Tennison – author, program developer and my travel companion in the country – personally interacted with Putin when he reviewed a program proposal for her at Marienskii City Hall in 1992. Although, it was impossible to know who he would go on to become, Putin made an impression on her at the time as the only Soviet/Russian official in her experience who had not asked for a bribe or favor.

Tennison also developed extensive contacts with young entrepreneurs throughout the country, including in the St. Petersburg area. Several of these entrepreneurs stated that Putin was the only local bureaucrat who had never charged a bribe for registering their businesses.

This general picture of Putin's honesty is buttressed by biographer Lynch as he addresses Putin's time as deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, stating:

“For much of this time, given Sobchak's frequent and protracted absences and his preoccupation with national affairs, Putin assumed the functions of acting mayor. He supervised the drafting and implementation of countless international business deals and policy reforms. These transactions did not always go according to plan, and no doubt many profited handsomely from Putin's admitted inexperience in these matters.

“During his attempt to establish municipal oversight over a series of casinos, for example, the city was cheated. In another case, the city was fleeced for \$120 million for two shipments of cooking oil. Although during this period his mother bought a choice apartment at an exceptionally low price at a city auction, Putin didn't seem to enrich himself personally. In the one specific public charge of corruption that was brought against him, Putin sued in court for slander and won.”

Lynch sums up Putin's character as follows: “Putin was not corrupt, at least in the conventional, venal sense. His modest and frankly unfashionable attire bespoke a seeming indifference to personal luxury....Putin was honest, certainly by Russian standards. He lived simply and worked diligently.” (Lynch, pp. 32-33)

Richard Sakwa, a British scholar specializing in Russia, has written perhaps the most comprehensive political biography of Putin, covering all three of his

presidential terms and how the Russian political system has evolved under his watch, both the positive and the negative. Sakwa interviewed numerous people who have worked with Putin throughout his career, including many who vouched for his honesty and relative sense of decency when handling political reassignments and other delicate internal matters.

Under Putin's leadership as either president or prime minister from 2000 to 2012, Russian citizens saw incomes increase five-fold, the poverty rate cut in half, consistent economic growth, and a safer country. Moreover, Russians enjoy universal health care, one of the highest rates of education in the world (54 percent of Russians have a college degree), and 140 days of paid maternity leave for women. And despite the misinformation regularly put out by Washington, including by President Barack Obama himself, Russia's average life expectancy is now 71 and has been increasing consistently for several years, rebounding from a stunning decline during the Yeltsin years.

Gradual Improvement

Tennison, who lives part-time in St. Petersburg, has been traveling throughout Russia since 1983, when it was still part of the Soviet Union, and has established a wide network of relationships and connections over three decades. He made the following observations in 2014 on the changes she has seen in Russia since 2000:

"During this time, I've traveled throughout Russia several times every year, and have watched the country slowly change under Putin's watch. Taxes were lowered, inflation lessened, and laws slowly put into place. Schools and hospitals began improving. Small businesses were growing, agriculture was showing improvement, and stores were becoming stocked with food.

"Highways were being laid across the country, new rails and modern trains appeared even in far out places, and the banking industry was becoming dependable. Russia was beginning to look like a decent country – certainly not where Russians hoped it to be long term, but improving incrementally for the first time in their memories."

She goes on to describe similar developments further out from the major cities, including in the Urals, Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk and Perm. New museums, municipal buildings and supermarkets, well-maintained streets, modern street lights and regular snow plowing in the winter were all observed.

During this period, Russia also became a creditor nation with relatively low foreign debt, substantial foreign and gold reserves, and a rainy day fund built up during the prosperous years. These are some of the reasons why Putin has

consistently had approval ratings between 60 percent and his high of 89 percent in late 2015.

The vast majority of Russians credit Putin with taking a nation that was on the verge of being a failed state, turning it around and creating concrete improvements in their lives. In my many conversations, Russians described him as a leader possessing patience, organization and determination. Overall, they believe his good qualities outweigh his flaws.

Russians also expressed support for his handling of foreign affairs. More specifically, they see him as standing up to numerous provocations from the U.S. and its NATO club.

Russian Interests

Putin is first and foremost a Russian patriot and pragmatist whose priorities, in addition to raising Russians' living standards, are the security and stability of the country.

Russia has a long history of invasions from all directions due to its lack of natural barriers like oceans and mountain ranges. In the Twentieth Century, it was invaded twice within a 25-year period by Germany. Some 27 million Soviet citizens, including 19 million civilians, perished in fighting off the Nazi Wehrmacht, leaving one-third of their country destroyed. By comparison, the U.S. lost approximately 405,000 and suffered no fighting or damage on its homeland. With this background, Soviet leader Gorbachev was understandably hesitant to allow a reunified Germany into NATO at the close of the Cold War.

By the time of the Malta meeting between Gorbachev and George H.W. Bush in December of 1989, the Berlin Wall had fallen and Washington had promised it would not "take advantage" of Gorbachev's decision to eschew using force to maintain control of Central/Eastern Europe. Two months later, Bush's Secretary of State, James Baker, negotiated a gentleman's agreement with Gorbachev that, in exchange for allowing a reunified Germany as a NATO member, NATO would not expand "one inch to the east."

Baker's argument was that NATO membership would have a restraining influence on a unified Germany as opposed to a militarily independent state. According to Viktor Kuvardin, an adviser to Gorbachev at the time, the Soviet leader did not press for the agreement in writing because he trusted Washington to abide by its promise.

Research by academic Mary Sarotte, published in the *Diplomatic History Journal* in 2010, which included interviews with participants and review of notes and other documentation from the meetings, indicates that American politicians'

subsequent denials that such an agreement was made are disingenuous. A November 2009 investigation by the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* came to the same conclusion.

After the Cold War, France and Germany believed that the best way to bring Russia into the Western fold and encourage its evolution as a democracy was through cooperation and gradual integration. But the U.S., which saw an intense lobbying campaign by the military-industrial complex and political pandering to certain constituencies, soon began pushing for NATO expansion as well as imposing neoliberal economic reforms, i.e., privatization of the economy and shrinking of the social safety net. Both policies were carried out under the pretext of spreading democracy and both have elicited strong resentment in Russia.

Overtures to the West

During Putin's first two terms as president, he made overtures to the U.S. and NATO in the hopes of some reciprocity and acknowledgment of Russia's interests. For example, after the 9/11 attacks, Putin was the first world leader to call President George W. Bush to offer his condolences and support. His reasoning was two-fold: one, he saw the U.S. and Russia as having a mutual interest in fighting Islamist terrorism; second, he knew that he had a tall order in successfully addressing the many profound problems facing Russia at the time.

He would need to put as much time, energy and resources as he could muster into the project of rehabilitating his country, which meant not wasting them on unnecessary conflict with the world's lone superpower. Going against the advice of most of his security team, he provided logistical and intelligence support as well as access to military bases on behalf of the U.S. operation in Afghanistan.

In return for this assistance, Putin received the equivalent of a swift kick in the shins from the neoconservative Bush administration in the form of a unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty to pursue a "missile defense shield" in 2002 and the accession of seven more nations of Eastern Europe into NATO in 2004. (Three others – Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic – had joined in 1999)

Seemingly undeterred, in 2008, Putin ordered the Russian Foreign Ministry to draft a proposal that Dmitry Medvedev took to Brussels, outlining a security plan that would cover all of the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia, obviating the need for NATO's continued existence, much less its expansion.

The preamble stated that: "the use of force or the threat of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other

way inconsistent with the goals and principles of the Charter of the United Nations is inadmissible in their mutual relations, as well as international relations in general.”

It also reiterated the intent to cooperatively address any security concerns that may arise among members. The body of the document contains mechanisms for how concerns or breaches of security could be handled. This proposal was sent to the leaders of relevant nations as well as the heads of European Union, NATO and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, emphasizing that Russia was open to suggestions and negotiation on the plan.

Putin and Medvedev heard crickets in response to their proposal.

Ratcheting Up Tensions

Not long afterward, Georgian leader Mikheil Saakashvili, egged on by elements in Washington, staged a military incursion into South Ossetia, killing Russian peacekeepers and prompting a strong military response by Russia. The 2009 E.U. fact-finding report on the war between Georgia and Russia does not support the insistence by Washington and the corporate media that Russia started the war.

Five years later, Ukraine, a country where the southeastern area had historically been part of the Russian Empire and the central and western areas part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, became the flashpoint. The E.U., led by Germany, recklessly tried to pressure Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich to sign an Association Agreement that contained terms that would be unwise for the leader of an already poor and divided nation on Russia's border to agree to. These included requirements that would result in major economic losses and a security clause that implied integration with NATO.

Again, elements from Washington engaged in provocations. A leaked phone call between Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland (a neoconservative from the Bush years whose rise at the State Department was facilitated by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt revealed them discussing who would take over Ukraine's leadership several weeks before Yanukovich was illegally overthrown in a violent putsch on Feb. 22, 2014. Footage of Nuland handing out pastries to the protesters also surfaced.

Contrary to repeated claims by the West that the violence on the Maidan, especially sniper fire that killed both police and protesters on Feb. 20, 2014, was the result of Yanukovich's forces or even Russian provocateurs, several credible sources indicate that neo-fascist forces, such as Svoboda and Right Sector, had hijacked the Maidan movement and were the responsible parties.

The first source is Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet during an intercepted phone conversation dated Feb. 26, 2014 in which he reports to then-E.U. High Commissioner Catherine Ashton that his on-the-ground sources told him:

“What was quite disturbing, the same oligarch told that well, all the evidence shows that the people who were killed by snipers from both sides, among policemen and people from the streets that they were the same snipers, killing people from both sides. ... So that and then she [Dr. Olga Bolgomets] also showed me some photos, she said that as medical doctor, she can, you know, say that it’s the same handwriting, the same type of bullets, and it’s really disturbing that now the new coalition they don’t want to investigate what exactly happened, so that now there is stronger and stronger understanding that behind the snipers, it was not Yanukovich, but it was somebody from the new coalition.”

This assessment was later supported by an April 2014 investigation by Germany’s ARD TV. An even more in-depth forensic investigation undertaken by Dr. Ivan Katchanovksi, a Canadian academic whose family originally hails from western Ukraine, also concluded that neo-fascist elements of the Maidan movement were culpable.

These extremists had refused to abide by a Feb. 21, 2014 agreement hammered out by Poland, France, Germany and the Yanukovich government in which the latter had agreed to reduced powers and early elections. Interestingly, these European countries have never publicly explained why they abandoned their role as guarantors of the agreement as the violence of Maidan escalated when the putsch occurred the following day.

Considering that none of these three sources can plausibly be accused of being Putin apologists, it casts the West’s whole narrative of “Putin aggression” in a very different light, including the subsequent referendum in Crimea in which 96 percent of the voters favored seceding from Ukraine and rejoining Russia in spring 2014.

View from Crimea

When I visited the three Crimean cities of Simferopol, Yalta and Sevastopol, I had conversations with a cross-section of people, from cab drivers and bus riders to small business owners and participants in what is variously referred to by the locals as “The Crimean Spring” and “The Third Defense of Sevastopol.” I came away with three conclusions.

The first is that Crimeans, who are mostly ethnic Russians who speak Russian, were genuinely alarmed by the ultra-nationalist rhetoric and violence coming out of Kiev, which resulted in what they viewed as an illegal coup by extremist

elements of the Maidan movement, supported by Washington.

As Tatyana, a professional tour guide in Yalta told me: “No one asked us if we wanted to go along with Maidan. There are Russians as well as people who are a mix of Russian and Ukrainian here. We are not against Ukraine as many of us have relatives there, but Maidan was not simply a spontaneous protest. We are aware of the phone call with Victoria Nuland and Geoffrey Pyatt, we saw the photos of her with Yatsenyuk, Tiagnibok [leader of Svoboda, the neo-fascist group that was condemned by the E.U. in 2012], and Klitschko on television. We saw the images of her handing out cookies to the protesters.”

These extremists had attacked ethnic Russians from Crimea who had participated in anti-Maidan protests and the attackers were reportedly on their way into the Crimean peninsula. As a result, Crimeans began to organize self-defense units to protect their communities.

Secondly, Crimeans did not necessarily think Russia would accept their requests for help. Crimea had been part of Russia from the time of Catherine the Great’s reign in the Eighteenth Century. But during the Soviet era, Premier Nikita Khrushchev gifted Crimea to Ukraine.

Since both Russia and Ukraine were part of the Soviet Union at the time, this was not a problem. However, when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Crimea remained in Ukraine as an autonomous region, while the naval base at Sevastopol was retained by Russia via a lease with the Kiev government. Between 1991 and 2013, Crimeans had voted several times to be reunited with Russia, only to have their requests ignored.

Putin, as any Russian leader would have, viewed the events of February 2014 as a threat to Russia’s naval base and only warm water port. Knowing that the Crimean population had repeatedly expressed its desire to be part of Russia, Putin decided on an operation to assist the native Crimeans in blocking both marauding ultra-nationalists and representatives of the coup government from interfering in activities that would facilitate Crimea’s quick reintegration into Russia.

Support for Reunification

Crimeans told me that they knew the so-called “little green men” were Russian soldiers legally stationed at the naval base who had donned unmarked uniforms. They also told me that they viewed them as protectors who allowed them to peacefully conduct their referendum, not as invaders. Suggestions that these Russian soldiers had pressured them to vote at gunpoint were dismissed as ridiculous.

Third, Crimeans were very happy to be part of Russia. Though they acknowledged

that there was still a lot of work to be done, they viewed the future with hope. These sentiments have been borne out in several Western opinion polls (Gallup, Pew, GfK, and Levada-Open Democracy) over the past two years.

When the topic of sanctions came up during a meeting with small business professionals in Simferopol, one of them stated, "We are suffering under the sanctions, but the sanctions will not make us go back to where we don't want to be. There are still many Crimeans willing to fight if it were to become necessary."

In a similar vein, one participant in the self-defense forces of Sevastopol, Nicolai Kachin, told me: "Sevastopol was the first city to rise up in Crimea. If residents hadn't stood up to defend themselves, war would be raging in Crimea worse than in the Donbass."

The Donbass is a region of southeastern Ukraine where Russian speakers had similar concerns. The West has typically characterized the Donbass rebels as puppets of Russia with no legitimate grievances or indigenous support. However, American Russia scholar Nicolai Petro, who spent a year in Ukraine and was in country when the upheaval occurred, has cited sociological surveys of Donbass residents from March, April and May of 2014 in which the results show that majorities considered the Right Sector to be dangerous and influential and the Maidan protests to be illegal and representing "an armed overthrow of the government, organized by the opposition, with the assistance of the West."

Kiev's subsequent decision to start an "anti-terrorist operation" against the Donbass region, instead of negotiating a resolution, has only hardened the view of Crimeans that their reunification with Russia was correct and saved them from a similar fate.

Alternative Approaches

One is left to wonder if this could have all been avoided if the West had engaged Russia in good faith on its proposal for a pan-western security architecture in 2008, instead of pushing what amounts to a very dangerous zero-sum game in Russia's backyard. Attempts to press for the eventual inclusion of Ukraine (and Georgia) into NATO have been ongoing since at least the George W. Bush administration when Condoleezza Rice had a heated discussion with Putin about it during a meeting in 2006.

When Rice tried to assert that each country had the right to decide for itself which alliances to join, Putin explained that Ukraine had many ethnic and political divisions and that such a move could create instability in the

country. Polling had reflected that the majority of Ukrainians at the time did not favor joining NATO. This, of course, was in addition to the fact that having a hostile military alliance right on its Western border was understandably perceived as a national security threat to Russia.

These points were reiterated in a conversation between Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and then-Ambassador to Russia William Burns as reflected in a confidential cable to Washington from February 2008 titled “Nyet Means Nyet: Russia’s NATO Enlargement Red Lines.”

In the cable, Burns states that Russia warned that pushing Ukraine into NATO could provoke a civil war and that Russia would consequently have to decide whether to intervene or not – a decision Lavrov emphasized Russia did not want to be faced with.

At a minimum, Washington needs to recognize what America’s preeminent Russia expert, Stephen F. Cohen, has noted. That is that we need a pragmatic partnership with Russia if we are to have any hope of addressing the most pressing challenges facing humanity: nuclear disarmament, catastrophic climate change, terrorism and global inequalities that have become destabilizing.

If one studies Putin’s speeches, along with major interviews, which are available in good English translations on the Kremlin website, one can deduce that Putin is an intelligent and rational actor who could be a partner to Washington in areas of mutual interest – as he has indeed demonstrated with respect to eliminating the Syrian government’s chemical weapons and assisting in the Iran nuclear deal.

Putin has been clear and consistent for years that he requires Russia’s interests to be taken into account, including its security. And this is as it should be. He was elected to represent and pursue Russia’s interests, not to serve Washington if he gets nothing in return. Unfortunately, Western corporate media routinely quotes Putin out of context or pretends that it is impossible to understand him because of their cartoonish characterization of him as a “thug.”

Challenges for Russia

Corruption

Corruption has been an intractable problem for centuries in Russia since the administrative state and its attendant tribute paying and harsh bureaucracy were established by the Mongols in the Thirteenth Century.

Indeed, it is one of the major issues Putin has publicly admitted he has failed so far to adequately resolve. Although there has been some progress as is

reflected in Russia's rapid rise in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business scores and the Coopers Waterhouse findings for 2016 that Russia has reduced economic crime by 12 percent in the last two years, it is recognized by both Putin and the Russian public that substantially more needs to be done.

Political and Civil Rights

Russians can travel freely as long as they can afford it. Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists are generally free to worship as they please. There is little overt censorship and all the Russians I spoke to said they had access to Western media through both satellite and the Internet, although they all found it to be very distorted and inaccurate in its portrayal of their country and their leader. There is a variety of opinion represented in print media, and even on pro-government Russian TV it is not unusual for a pro-Western viewpoint to be included on political talk shows.

There is still considerable room for improvement for journalists in Russia. However, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, deaths of journalists have actually gone down in the Putin era of governance compared to the Yeltsin era. One would be hard-pressed to know that judging by the way Western politicians and media have undertaken an over-the-top vilification campaign against Putin but gushed that Yeltsin was a "democrat."

As for the fate of Anna Politkovskaya, the idea that Putin was behind her murder has been promiscuously bandied about in the West, but no evidence has ever been presented. Moreover, her employers at *Novaya Gazeta* believe the Chechen leadership was behind her death, not the Russian government. Those who carried out the murder have been convicted in Russian court and are now in prison, but it is troubling that whoever ordered it remains at large.

Civil society development has had a setback with the foreign agents law. While some civil society activists whom I spoke to acknowledged that Western provocateurs were a problem, there were many authentic NGO's that were being caught in the dragnet and the law is consequently viewed among them as a mistake that needs to be rectified. The Russian population in general is divided on this legislation. In response to some of the criticism, in May of this year, the Duma amended the law to exclude charities and cultural organizations.

There have still been some openings for modest civil society development. For example, an independent organization of citizens called the Public Council has developed since 2014 in the city of Krasnodar. It has successfully worked to get the local authorities to start taking the needs and desires of citizens into account when making decisions and enacting policies.

Among other things, they have stopped the destruction of old trees, buildings and parks as well as networked with youth groups and infrastructure specialists, including foreign experts in urban planning, public arts, transportation and city marketing. They have organized periodic cleanup and renovation days sponsored by local businesses that donate equipment, and are working to connect the city's hiking trails and protect its 16 lakes.

Not only have they received no opposition from Russian authorities, they have begun to gain positive recognition as well as interest from other Russian cities looking to replicate their model.

Another example is a civic education program to teach democracy skills to Russians designed by an independent American named Charles Heberle. The program has been under implementation in a province near St. Petersburg and has had the quiet backing of the Putin government since the early 2000's.

As the French and Germans wisely recognized at the end of the Cold War, it would serve the goal of encouraging Russia's evolution toward more openness and democracy if their deep and historical fears of hostility, invasion and exploitation are not provoked. If given the time and space, without U.S. meddling, Russia will address its own internal problems and evolve into a system that will reflect its unique geography, culture and political history.

Natylie Baldwin is co-author of *Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard & How the West Was Checkmated*, available from Tayen Lane Publishing. In October of 2015, she traveled to 6 cities in the Russian Federation and has written several articles based on her conversations and interviews with a cross-section of Russians. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in various publications including Consortium News, Russia Insider, OpEd News, The New York Journal of Books, The Common Line, Santa Fe Sun Monthly, Dissident Voice, Energy Bulletin, Newtopia Magazine, and the Lakeshore. She blogs at natyliesbaldwin.com.

Pushing NATO to Russia's Southern Flank

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

By Jonathan Marshall

A Republican leader calling for a new military base in Georgia is hardly

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Moscow's ambassador to NATO complained, "NATO is trying to draw us into a state of Cold War by inflating the myth about the threat from the East and justifying the necessity to deter Russia."

NATO and the Roots of Conflict

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

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

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

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

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

President Saakashvili's attempt to retake that territory in 2008 reflected his understandable overestimation of Washington's willingness to back him up. Perhaps he listened too much to his paid lobbyist Randy Scheunemann, a neoconservative leader and chief foreign policy adviser to U.S. presidential candidate John McCain. Hardly had the war begun than McCain and other hawks rushed to blame Russia as the aggressor. The Arizona senator declared, “we are all Georgians.”

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

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

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

Fueling a New Cold War

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

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

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

In the West, the 2008 war fueled more anti-Russian sentiment, despite the consensus of most authorities that Georgia initiated the conflict. NATO roundly condemned Russia for recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, setting the stage for continued tension for Moscow. In 2009, the newly elected President Obama began a training program for Georgian military forces.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jonathan Marshall is author or co-author of five books on international affairs, including The Lebanese Connection: Corruption, Civil War and the International Drug Traffic (Stanford University Press, 2012). Some of his previous articles

for Consortiumnews were “Risky Blowback from Russian Sanctions”; “Neocons Want Regime Change in Iran”; “Saudi Cash Wins France’s Favor”; “The Saudis’ Hurt Feelings”; “Saudi Arabia’s Nuclear Bluster”; “The US Hand in the Syrian Mess”; and “Hidden Origins of Syria’s Civil War.”]

US Arms Makers Invest in a New Cold War

Exclusive: Behind the U.S. media-political clamor for a new Cold War with Russia is a massive investment by the Military-Industrial Complex in “think tanks” and other propaganda outlets, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

The U.S. military has won only a single major war since the end of World War II (the Gulf War of 1990-91). But U.S. military contractors continue to win major budget wars in Congress nearly every year, proving that no force on earth can resist their lobbying prowess and political clout.

Consider the steady march to victory of the biggest single weapons program in history – the planned purchase of advanced Lockheed-Martin F-35 jets by the Air Force, Navy, and Marines at a total projected cost of *more than \$1 trillion*.

The Air Force and Marines have both declared the Joint Strike Fighter ready for combat, and Congress is now forking over billions of dollars a year to acquire what is slated to become a fleet of 2,400 jets.

Yet the world’s most expensive fighter bomber still doesn’t work properly and may never perform as advertised. That’s not “dezinformatsiya” from Russian “information warfare” specialists. That’s the official opinion of the Pentagon’s top weapons evaluator, Michael Gilmore.

In an Aug, 9 memo obtained by Bloomberg News, Gilmore warned senior Pentagon officials that the F-35 program “is actually not on a path toward success but instead on a path toward failing to deliver” the aircraft’s promised capabilities. He said the program “is running out of time and money to complete the planned flight testing and implement the required fixes and modifications.”

The military testing czar reported that complex software problems and testing deficiencies “continue to be discovered at a substantial rate.” As a result, the planes may fail to track moving targets on the ground, warn pilots when enemy radar systems spot them, or make use of a newly designed bomb. Even the F-35’s

gun may not function properly.

Devastating Assessments

The internal Pentagon assessment was just the latest in a long list of devastating critical assessments and development setbacks for the plane. They include repeated groundings of the plane due to fires and other safety issues; the discovery of dangerous engine instability; and helmets that can cause fatal whiplash. The plane even got soundly beaten in a mock engagement with a much older (and cheaper) F-16.

Last year, an article in the conservative *National Review* argued that “the biggest threat the U.S. military faces over the next few decades is not the carrier-killing Chinese anti-ship ballistic missile, or the proliferation of inexpensive quiet diesel-electric attack subs, or even Chinese and Russian anti-satellite programs. The biggest threat comes from the F-35 . . . For this trillion-dollar-plus investment we get a plane far slower than a 1970s F-14 Tomcat, a plane with less than half the range of a 40-year-old A-6 Intruder . . . and a plane that had its head handed to it by an F-16 during a recent dogfight competition.”

Likening the F-35 to a previous failed fighter jet program, retired Air Force Colonel Dan Ward observed last year, “Perhaps the truly best scenario for the Joint Strike Fighter is for it to follow in the footsteps of the F-22 and provide a combat capability that is irrelevant to actual military needs. That way, when the whole fleet gets grounded because of an unsolvable flaw, the impact on our defense posture would be nil.”

Lockheed’s “Pay-to-Play Ad Agency”

Coming to the program’s defense most recently was military analyst Dan Goure, in the blog of the respected magazine, *The National Interest*. Goure belittled critics in the Pentagon’s Operational Test and Evaluation Office as “green eyeshade people, like the goblins at Gringott’s in the Harry Potter series.”



Describing the F-35 as “a revolutionary platform,” he declared, “Its ability to operate undetected in hostile airspace, gathering information and even targeting data on enemy air and ground targets, before launching surprise attacks demonstrates a decisive advantage over existing threat systems. . . . The Joint Strike Fighter test program is making progress at an accelerated rate. More to the point, even before it has completed the rigid performance template laid out by DOT&E, the F-35 has demonstrated capabilities that far exceed any current Western fighter.”

If that reads a bit like a Lockheed-Martin marketing brochure, consider the source. In his article, Goure identified himself only as a vice president of the Lexington Institute, which bills itself as “a nonprofit public-policy research organization headquartered in Arlington, Virginia.”

What Goure didn’t say – and the Lexington Institute doesn’t generally disclose – is that “it receives contributions from defense giants Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman and others, which pay Lexington to ‘comment on defense,’” according to a 2010 profile in *Politico*.

Earlier the same year, *Harper’s* contributor Ken Silverstein called the widely quoted think tank “the defense industry’s pay-to-play ad agency.” He added, “Outfits like Lexington produce the press conferences, position papers and op-eds that keep military money flowing to defense contractors.”

Goure’s indirect association with Lockheed gives a hint as to why programs like the F-35 continue to thrive despite performance failures, gigantic cost overruns, and schedule delays that would otherwise trigger headline-grabbing congressional investigations and produce streams of indignant rhetoric from Fox News commentators about government failure.

Promoting the New Cold War

Think tanks like the Lexington Institute are prime movers behind the domestic propaganda campaign to revive the Cold War against the diminished Russian state and justify weapons programs like the F-35.

As Lee Fang observed recently in *The Intercept*, “The escalating anti-Russian rhetoric in the U.S. presidential campaign comes in the midst of a major push by military contractors to position Moscow as a potent enemy that must be countered with a drastic increase in military spending by NATO countries.”

Thus the Lockheed-funded Aerospace Industries Association warns that the Obama administration is failing to spend enough on “aircraft, ship and ground combat systems” to adequately address “Russian aggression on NATO’s doorstep.” The Lockheed- and Pentagon-funded Center for European Policy Analysis issues a

stream of alarmist reports about Russian military threats to Eastern Europe.

And the highly influential Atlantic Council – funded by Lockheed-Martin, Raytheon, the U.S. Navy, Army, Air Force, Marines, and even the Ukrainian World Congress – promotes articles like “Why Peace is Impossible with Putin” and declares that NATO must “commit to greater military spending” to deal with “a revanchist Russia.”

Origins of NATO’s Expansion

The campaign to portray Russia as a menace, led by contractor-funded pundits and analysts, began soon after the Cold War ended. In 1996, Lockheed executive Bruce Jackson founded the U.S. Committee on NATO, whose motto was “Strengthen America, Secure Europe. Defend Values. Expand NATO.”

Its mission ran directly contrary to promises by the George H.W. Bush administration not to expand the Western military alliance eastward after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Joining Jackson were such neo-conservative hawks as Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle and Robert Kagan. One neocon insider called Jackson – who went on to co-found the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq – “the nexus between the defense industry and the neoconservatives. He translates us to them, and them to us.”

The organization’s intense and highly successful lobbying efforts did not go unnoticed. In 1998, the *New York Times* reported that “American arms manufacturers, who stand to gain billions of dollars in sales of weapons, communication systems and other military equipment if the Senate approves NATO expansion, have made enormous investments in lobbyists and campaign contributions to promote their cause in Washington. . . .

“The four dozen companies whose main business is arms have showered candidates with \$32.3 million since the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe at the beginning of the decade. By comparison, the tobacco lobby spent \$26.9 million in that same period, 1991 to 1997.”

A spokesman for Lockheed said, “We’ve taken the long-term approach to NATO expansion, establishing alliances. When the day arrives and those countries are in a position to buy combat aircraft, we certainly intend on being a competitor.”

The lobbying worked. In 1999, against Russian opposition, NATO absorbed the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. In 2004, it added Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Albania and Croatia joined next in 2009. Most provocatively, in 2008 NATO invited Ukraine to join the Western

alliance, setting the stage for the dangerous conflict between NATO and Russia over that country today.

The fortunes of American arms makers soared. “By 2014, the twelve new [NATO] members had purchased close to \$17 billion worth of American weapons,” according to Andrew Cockburn, “while . . . Romania celebrated the arrival of Eastern Europe’s first \$134 million Lockheed Martin Aegis Ashore missile-defense system.”

Last fall, *Washington Business Journal* reported that “if anyone is benefitting from the unease between Russia and the rest of the world, it would have to be Bethesda-based Lockheed Martin Corp. (NYSE: LMT). The company is positioned to make large profits off what could very well be an international military spending spree by Russia’s neighbors.”

Citing a big contract to sell missiles to Poland, the newspaper added, “Officials from Lockheed aren’t explicitly declaring that Russian President Vladimir Putin’s adventurism in Ukraine is good for business, but they aren’t shying away from recognizing the opportunity that Poland is presenting them as Warsaw continues to embark on a massive military modernization project – one that has accelerated as tensions grip Eastern Europe.”

Lockheed’s Lobby Machine

Lockheed continues to pump money into the American political system to ensure that it remains the nation’s largest military contractor. From 2008 to 2015, its lobbying expenditures exceeded \$13 million in all but one year. The company sprinkled business from the F-35 program into 46 states and claims that it generates tens of thousands of jobs.

Among the 18 states enjoying a claimed economic impact of more than \$100 million from the fighter jet is Vermont— which is why the F-35 gets the support even of Sen. Bernie Sanders.

As he told one town hall meeting, “It employs hundreds of people. It provides a college education for hundreds of people. So for me the question is not whether we have the F-35 or not. It is here. The question for me is whether it is located in Burlington, Vermont or whether it is located in Florida.”

In 1961, President Eisenhower observed that the “conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry” had begun to influence “every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government.”

In his famous farewell address to the nation, Eisenhower warned that “we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or

unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

How right he was. But not even Ike could have imagined the extravagant costs to the nation of failing to hold that complex at bay – ranging from a trillion-dollar fighter jet program to the needless and far more dangerous resurrection of the Cold War a quarter century after the West achieved victory.

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

Target: Yugoslavia (A Look into the Future)

From the Archive: NATO’s 1999 war on Serbia showcased some of America’s then-cutting-edge strategies for waging electronic sabotage against an “enemy,” including hacking computers and controlling information, wrote Robert Parry in real time.

By Robert Parry (Originally published on May 4, 1999)

At center stage and behind the scenes, NATO’s war for Kosovo is pressing the edges of modern “information warfare.” Through the early phases of the conflict, NATO concentrated its attacks on command-and-control centers, power stations and even propaganda outlets. Those attacks included sophisticated electronic assaults on computers directing Serb air defenses and so-called “soft bombs” to short out electrical lines.

But there are new indications that President Bill Clinton might be opting for a far more expansive high-tech “info-war” assault to punish the Yugoslavian government, its leaders and the nation’s economy for atrocities in Kosovo.

In such an electronic offensive against Serbia, U.S. intelligence has the secret capability to go much further than sporadic battlefield computer hacking and causing black-outs. U.S. info-warriors have the capacity to plant viruses in civilian computer systems, alter bank records, and generally wreak havoc on

Yugoslavia's infrastructure, from disrupting electrical utilities to shutting down the phone system.

U.S. government hackers could target government bank accounts used for purchasing military supplies or the personal accounts of Yugoslav leaders. Funds could be deleted electronically to frustrate the prosecution of the war or to punish selected Yugoslav leaders for "ethnic cleansing" in Kosovo.

Intelligence sources say the U.S. forces in the Balkans were ill-prepared for this broader info-war when the NATO bombing started on March 24, 1999. One reason was the difficulty of gaining a NATO consensus for exotic tactics.

So initially, the info-war focused only on the battlefield. *Time* magazine caught a glimpse of the U.S. capability in its reporting on the Pentagon's successes in "taking down the Serbian air defenses." The Pentagon cited "attacks, jamming and corrupting data, which the allies have fed into Yugoslav computers through microwave transmissions." [*Time*, April 26, 1999]

A Bag of Tricks

Later, expert teams were mobilized and tasked to the Yugoslav theater. Then, after NATO approved expanded operations, the U.S. military began pulling surprises out of its technological bag of tricks.

The first widely noted application of classified techno-warfare occurred on May 2, 1999. A "soft" bomb detonated over a Yugoslav electrical plant, spraying carbon filaments over the power lines and causing short-circuits that blacked out most of the country for seven hours.

"We have certain weapons we don't talk about," said Maj. Gen. Charles Wald. In line with info-war strategies, he noted that an electrical outage "confuses command and control, it disconnects and confuses computers."

Government sources say that President Clinton now is poised to go further in using some of the Big Brother capabilities that are featured in Hollywood thrillers, such as "Enemy of the State," though the techniques are rarely acknowledged officially.

The sources said Clinton has authorized secret intelligence operations against Yugoslavia, but those sources were unwilling to discuss any details about the high-tech strategies. Countries, such as Yugoslavia, with relatively primitive computers running their economy are considered especially vulnerable to info-war attacks, according to experts in these strategies.

Moral Issues

Some info-war advocates also argue that computer sabotage is a far more humane way to wage war than the current practice of dropping bombs and firing off missiles. These advocates note the obvious: that electronic attacks do not carry the immediate physical risk to civilians that explosives do.

But there are ethical concerns, too, about attacking a nation's computer infrastructure and severely destabilizing its economy. Plus, there are fears that a computer virus or a similar tactic could backfire and infect computers far beyond Yugoslavia.

In a rare media report on the sensitive topic, *The National Journal* recently observed that "relatively modest questions [have been] raised here at home by the United States' undoubted ability to wage offensive information warfare by hacking into foreign computers to pilfer secrets, move funds, corrupt data, and destroy software.

"When such activities are planned for a narrow, routine, peacetime spy operation, they are dubbed 'special intelligence operations' and must be approved by top officials, sometimes even by the president. But what if a more massive U.S. hacker attack was designed to wreck the computers that control an enemy's banking system, electrical-power grid, or telephone network?" [National Journal, March 27, 1999]

While skirting clear confirmation of a U.S. offensive info-war capability, American officials occasionally do discuss info-war developments in the third person, as if the United States were not a participant in this new arms race.

On Feb. 2, 1999, for instance, CIA Director George Tenet stated that "several countries have or are developing the capability to attack an adversary's computer systems." He added that "developing a computer attack capability can be quite inexpensive and easily conceal-able: it requires little infrastructure, and the technology required is dual-use."

Left unsaid in Tenet's statement was that the U.S. government, with the world's most powerful computers and the most sophisticated software designs, has led the way both in offensive info-war strategies and defensive countermeasures.

Other times, when info-war gets mentioned in the American news media, it is in the context of a real or potential threat from an "enemy" seeking to damage the United States and its allies.

On March 31, 1999, one week into NATO's air war, NATO's spokesman Jamie Shea prompted "info-war" alert headlines in U.S. newspapers when he complained that "some hackers in Belgrade" had caused "line saturation" at the official NATO Web site.

But NATO computer experts acknowledged that this low-grade harassment was more “spamming” than hacking and that no sensitive computer systems had been entered. [Washington Post, April 1, 1999]

Revolutionary Potential

The U.S. military demonstrated the revolutionary potential of information warfare during the Persian Gulf War in 1990-91. With air attacks and technical means, U.S. forces destroyed Saddam Hussein’s command-and-control structure even before concentrating on his tanks and troops.

Scattered journalistic reports at the time noted U.S. success in planting viruses in Iraqi military computer systems. Since the Gulf War, however, Washington apparently has applied info-war techniques sparingly.

Sources say covert info-war attacks have been limited to such national security concerns as disrupting the financial operations of some South American drug cartels.

In one case study of a CIA high-tech “dirty trick” from the mid-1990s, U.S. intelligence reportedly learned of a drug lord’s plans to bribe a South American government official. After the money was transferred, the spy agency accessed the bank records and remotely deleted the bribe.

Besides stopping the bribe, the money’s disappearance spread confusion within the cartel. The recriminations that followed – with the corrupt official and the drug lord complaining about the lost money – led eventually to the execution of a hapless bookkeeper, according to the story.

By the mid-1990s, the potential for info-war had become such a hot topic within the U.S. military that the Pentagon hired an outside consultant to summarize some of the important lessons in a chatty 13-page booklet called “Information Warfare for Dummies.”

The booklet was designed to clue in some of the Pentagon’s more unplugged officers “given our department’s unrelenting focus on the topic.” The booklet starts out by explaining the first objective for any lap-topped GI fighting a future Information War [IW]: “Destroy (or weaken) the bad guy’s system and protect your own.”

The manual separates the more traditional military methods from the new high-tech techniques. “Assault technologies for the Information Warrior can be divided into ‘hard kill,’ involving physical destruction, and ‘soft kill,’ where the goal is electronic or psychological disruption,” the primer states. “Their commonality lies in their emphatic focus on information – destroying it,

corrupting it, and denying it.”

The primer notes that more traditional information warfare will target an enemy’s battlefield command-and-control structure to “decapitate” the fighters from their senior officers, thereby “causing panic and paralysis.” But the primer adds that “network penetrations” – or hacking – “represents a new and very high-tech form of warfighting.”

Indirectly, the booklet acknowledges secret U.S. capabilities in these areas. In an easy-to-read style, the manual describes these info-war tactics as “fairly ground-breaking stuff for our nation’s mud-sloggers. ... Theft and the intentional manipulation of data are the product of devilish minds. ... Pretty shady, those Army folks.”

Disruptive Strategies

The primer also gives some hints about the disruptive strategies in the U.S. arsenal. “Network penetrations” include “insertion of malicious code (viruses, worms, etc.), theft of information, manipulation of information, denial of service,” the primer says.

But the booklet also recognizes the taboo nature of the topic. “Due to the moral, ethical and legal questions raised by hacking, the military likes to keep a low profile on this issue,” the primer explains. “Specific DOD references to viral insertions are scarce” in public literature, the booklet observes.

The ethical questions include: “Is penetrating another nation’s computer system somehow ‘dirty’ and ‘wrong’ – something the U.S. military has no business doing? Are electronic attacks against a nation’s financial transaction computers too destabilizing and perhaps immoral?”

Despite the Pentagon’s nervousness about these tactics, the booklet notes that they do have advantages over other military operations. “The intrusions can be carried out remotely, transcending the boundaries of time and space,” the manual states. “They also offer the prospect of ‘plausible deniability’ or repudiation.”

The booklet indicates that U.S. intelligence has found it relatively easy to cover its tracks. “Due to the difficulty of tracing a network penetration to its source, it’s difficult for the adversary to prove that you are the one responsible for corrupting their system,” the primer says. “In fact, viral infections can be so subtle and insidious that the adversary may not even know that their systems have been attacked.”

The primer outlines other Buck-Rogers-type info-war weapons, such as

electromagnetic pulse [EMP] bombs. "The high-energy pulse emitted by an EMP bomb can temporarily or permanently disable all electronics systems, including computers, for a radius of several kilometers," the manual says.

"Put simply, EMP weaponry fries electronic circuitry. EMP weapons can be launched by airborne platforms or detonated inside information centers (banks, corporate headquarters, telephone exchanges, military command posts). The explosion needed to trigger the electromagnetic pulse apparently is minor compared to a conventional blast, theoretically resulting in fewer human casualties."

The manual stresses, too, info-war's potential for high-quality "psyops and deception" to confuse and demoralize a targeted population. "Future applications of psyops may include realistic computer simulations and 'morphed' imagery broadcasts of bogus news events," the booklet explains.

Though deception has always been part of warfare, the booklet argues that "it is the sheer qualitative differences offered by today's information technologies that makes IW potentially revolutionary."

Some military theoreticians call the info-war capabilities "a Military-Techonological Revolution," a phrase reserved for major breakthroughs such as the discovery of gun powder or the development of strategic bombing.

But the manual observes some dangers. The info-war attacks, especially viral infections, could backfire and harm U.S. interests.

Recruiting Hackers

The manual wonders, too, whether the Army will have success in recruiting "hacker-types and 'nerds'." Then, there is "the \$64 question: will the hackers 'go bad' and given the fighter-jock mentality of the U.S. military, will the 'nerd track' be a career killer?"

More recent internal papers indicate that in the past year, the Pentagon has begun concentrating on how to maintain its dominance in the info-war field.

Rand's National Defense Research Institute drafted a report entitled "Strategic Information Warfare Rising" and suggested to the Pentagon several scenarios for managing and sharing "strategic information warfare" [SIW] capabilities with allies.

One scenario holds that the United States "overwhelmingly dominates the SIW warfare" with "the world's best offensive SIW tools and techniques, capable of penetrating any other country's SIW defenses." The United States could then pick

which allies would come under its defensive umbrella.

Another scenario foresees the United States leading five to 10 countries with advanced SIW capabilities, but with other nations lacking the technical skills to break into “the exclusivity of the club.”

Other scenarios stress defensive rather than offensive capacities. But an underlying theme of the report is the unquestioned dominance of the United States in these fields. [Intelligence Newsletter, Jan. 28, 1999]

Other insights into U.S. info-war capabilities can be found in papers of military intelligence specialists from other nations. In articles in China’s Liberation Army Daily, Cols. Wang Baocun and Li Fei expressed alarm about the West’s impressive lead in sophisticated information warfare.

In an apparent reference to the U.S. military and its allies, the authors wrote, “some countries are now considering the organization and establishment of computer virus warfare platoons.” [Liberation Army Daily, June 13 & 20, 1995]

It is not clear whether such “platoons” formally exist in the U.S. Army – though obviously the specialty does. It also is too early to tell whether such information warriors will play a significant role in the war for Kosovo.

But, depending how aggressive President Clinton chooses to be, the Balkan war could turn into an important testing ground for these new offensive tactics – the conflict could become what the president might call a warfare bridge to the 21st Century.

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

Lurching Toward World War III

Anti-Russian hysteria has reached extraordinary levels in Official Washington with heated allegations about Russia hacking Democratic Party emails, but this over-the-top “group think” threatens the world’s future, explains John Chuckman.

By John Chuckman

When did America's establishment ever discuss, in elections or at other times, issues of war and peace for the people's understanding and consent? Virtually never. There was no mandate for Vietnam, Cambodia, Iraq, Libya, Syria, or a dozen other conflicts.

Of course, once a war gets going, there is a tendency for Americans to close ranks with flags and ribbons and slogans such as "Support our troops" and "Love it or leave it." The senior leaders know this psychological pattern, and they count on it, every time.

The fundamental problem in America's government is an elaborate political structure much resembling democracy but with actual rule by a powerful establishment and a set of special interests – all supported by a monstrous security apparatus and a huge, lumbering military, which wouldn't even know what to do with itself in peace. Unfortunately, I don't think there is any apparent solution to this horrible political reality, and, while once it affected primarily Americans themselves, today it affects the planet.

There is an intense new element that has been added to America's governing establishment: the drive of the neocons for American supremacy everywhere, for complete global dominance, and it is something which is frighteningly similar to past drives by fascist governments which brought only human misery on a vast scale.

The neocons' underlying motive, I believe, is absolute security for America's colony in the Middle East, Israel – put another way, their concern is for Israel's hegemony over its entire region with no room for anyone else to act in their own interests. It is only if the United States is deeply engaged all over the planet that Israel can constantly benefit from its strange relationship with America.

It did not require the neocons to interest America's establishment with interfering in other people's affairs. America has a long history of doing so, stretching back to the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, the Philippine-American War, the brazen seizure of Hawaii from its people and going right up to the pointless War in Vietnam and Cambodia in the hope of keeping the Pacific Ocean effectively an American lake. But the neocons have added a new force, a new impulse to something which would be better left alone, and they are very influential in American affairs.

Ordinary Americans are not interested in world affairs, and there is a great deal of evidence to support that statement. American Imperialists of earlier times disparaged this tendency to just want peace at home with the pejorative name, *isolationism*, and avoiding isolationism became an excuse for a whole

series of wars and interventions.

So, Americans today cannot be allowed to fall back into their natural tendency of not caring. Thus we have the drive of the neocons and, tragically, thus we have America being driven into direct confrontation with Russia. And with China, too, of course, but Russia is my focus since Russia is the only country in the world literally capable of obliterating the United States. There is unquestionably a sense here of Rome wanting to go after Carthage, although cavalry, swords, spears and catapults no longer can settle such conflicts.

The situation is compounded by the American establishment's dawning realization that its days of largely unquestioned supremacy in the world are fading into memory, as other countries grow and develop and have important interests in world affairs.

In many respects, it has been a long downhill slide for the average American since the economic heyday of the 1950s. Decline in real incomes, decline in good job opportunities at home, the export of American industries abroad to areas of less costly labor, and the virtual collapse of American towns and cities in many places, Detroit being perhaps the most sorrowful case of many – all these are evident year-in and year-out.

Lost Perspective

I do think the American establishment simply does not know how to handle its role in a brave new world, but do something it clearly thinks it must, and that is an extremely dangerous state of mind. It is armed with vast armies and terrible weapons so that it retains a sense of being able to act in some way to permanently reclaim its place, an illusion if ever there was one.

We know from scholars of the past the role that the mere existence of terrible military power can play in disaster. Huge standing armies were one of the major underlying causes of the First World War, a conflict in which 20 million people perished. Germany repeated the effort with Hitler's government working tirelessly to create what was to become the finest and most advanced army the world had ever seen until that time, but it, too, ended in disaster, and of even greater proportions.

America has not discovered the secret to making itself invulnerable, although I fear that its establishment believes that it can do so, and that represents the most dangerous possible thinking.

Contrary to political speeches, America's establishment has never shown great concern over the welfare of ordinary Americans, and today its lack of concern is almost palpable. Washington's white-maned, over-fed, crinkly-faced senators

spend virtually every ounce of effort in two activities: raising funds from special interests for re-election (estimated at two-thirds of an average Senator's time) and conspiring on how to keep America dominant in the world. Anything else is just piffle.

America's unique place in the world of 1950 took care of ordinary Americans, not any effort by government. Again, the utter contempt for ordinary Americans perhaps offers a dark element in the thinking of America's establishment when it comes to possible nuclear war.

Russia is not, of course, a direct threat to neocon interests, except when it comes to matters like Syria, a deliberately-engineered horror to bring down the last independent-minded leader in the Middle East and to smash and Balkanize his country, parts of which, Israel has always lusted after in its vision of Greater Israel.

The coup in Ukraine, which borders along a great stretch of Russia, represented a direct challenge to Russia's security, offering a place ultimately to be filled with hostile forces and missiles and American advisors – all of which was expected to silence Russia's independent voice in the world and its ability to in any way thwart neocon adventures, if not, in the longer-range, savage dreams of some, to provide a platform for the ultimate destruction or overthrow of Russia herself.

Russia's effective countering with skillful moves in its own interests both in Syria and Ukraine has driven some of America's establishment to the edge of madness, and that madness is what we see and hear in Europe, which is once again being turned into a vast armed camp. Europe is now seething with anti-Russian rhetoric, threats and activities such as huge war games, the largest of which occurred around the anniversary of Hitler's invasion of Russia, the single most destructive event in all of human history.

America has created deliberately a situation almost as dangerous as the days of the Cuban missile crisis, which itself arose from the American establishment's belief that it had every right to interfere in Cuba's affairs.

Nuclear Threats

We have another element, now compounding the danger, in a far greater variety and level of sophistication of weapons, including some nuclear weapons whose controlled yields are regarded by America's military as being perhaps "usable" in a theater like Europe.

The installation of anti-missile systems near Russia is very much part of this threat since these systems not only are intended to neutralize Russia's capacity

for response to a sudden, massive attack but to provide a cover for future covert, easily-done substitution of other kinds of missiles into the launchers, faster-arriving, nuclear-armed missiles which would indeed be an element in such an attack.

Russia, a country twice invaded with all the might of Germany and before that by Napoleon's Grande Armée, cannot be expected just to sit and do nothing. It won't. It cannot.

The world must not forget that America's military, a number of times in the past, created complete plans for a massive, surprise nuclear attack on what was then the Soviet Union, the last of which I am aware was in the early 1960s, and it was presented as being feasible to President Kennedy, who is said to have left the Pentagon briefing sick to his stomach.

Nuclear war, just as with any other kind of war, can happen almost by accident through blunders and careless acts and overly-aggressive postures. Just let the blood of two sides get up enough, and an utter disaster could quickly overtake us.

Constantly decreasing the possibilities for accidents and misunderstandings is a prime responsibility of every major world leader, and right now the United States is pretty close to having completely abdicated its responsibility.

John Chuckman is former chief economist for a large Canadian oil company.
