

# The Berkeley Tribute to Robert Parry

A tribute to Robert Parry, the founder and editor of Consortium News, was held in Berkeley last month. Here is the video of the event and excerpts from the speakers who celebrated Bob's life.

**By Rick Sterling**

**Event Photos by Bill Hackwell**

A celebration and salute to the investigative journalist and publisher Robert Parry took place on Saturday, May 19 in Berkeley California.

You can watch a video shot by Raj Sahei of the entire event [here](#).

Robert Parry was born in 1949 and died of pancreatic cancer in January 2018. From 1974 until the early 1990's he worked as investigative journalist for Associated Press, Newsweek magazine and then PBS Frontline. During that time, he played a key role breaking stories on the illegal funding of the Nicaraguan Contras, CIA collusion with drug dealers, and Ronald Reagan election team negotiating with Iran to delaying the release of American hostages until after the 1980 election. Frustrated with the increasing difficulty of getting his research and findings published, Parry founded the investigative journal Consortium News, which continues to today.

Although Bob never became a household name, many readers will recall News stories he played a key role in bringing to public consciousness. He uncovered the "Iran-Contra scandal" where the US secretly sold weapons to Iran via Israel with profits supporting mercenary "Contras" attacking the Nicaraguan government. He uncovered Lt. Col. Oliver North secretly working at the Reagan White House to supervise support for the Contras. He exposed CIA collusion with criminals sending weapons to the Contras and receiving tons of cocaine on return flights from Colombia and Central America.

In 1988, Parry co-authored an [article](#) that documented CIA and State Department activities to misinform the public to promote the desired public policy.

Next, Parry worked with PBS Frontline to uncover the "October Surprise". That story involved Ronald Reagan's election team secretly delaying the release of American hostages held in Iran. These stories appeared in mainstream media but were ultimately swept under the carpet.

## **The CIA-Contra-Cocaine Connection**

The story about CIA complicity with drug-dealers was especially explosive

because of the impact of drugs in poor communities across the US. There was an epidemic of cheap crack cocaine flooding poor and especially African American communities.

Robert Parry originally reported the CIA-Contra-Cocaine story in the mid 1980's. Ten years later, in 1996, investigative journalist Gary Webb uncovered what happened after the cocaine arrived in the U.S.: crack cocaine had flooded poor and African American communities, especially in California. The negative consequences were huge. The San Jose Mercury News published Gary Webb's investigation as an explosive front page 3-day series titled "Dark Alliance".

The story was initially ignored by the foreign policy and media establishment. But after two months of rising attention and outrage, especially in the African American community, a counter-attack was launched in the NY Times, Washington Post and LA Times. The LA Times alone assigned 17 reporters to what one reporter dubbed the "Get Gary Webb team". They picked apart the story, picked apart Gary Webb's personal life and distorted what he wrote. The attack succeeded. The Mercury News editors published a partial "correction" which was taken to apply to the whole story. Gary Webb was demoted and then "let go". His reputation was destroyed and he ultimately committed suicide. An 2014 movie titled "Kill the Messenger", made in consultation with Gary's family and Bob Parry, depicts the events.

When the establishment media was going after Gary Webb, with the quiet encouragement of the CIA, many journalists were silent or joined the pack attack. Later, when an internal CIA investigation confirmed the veracity of Webb's research and writing, they mostly ignored it. Robert Parry was one of the few national journalists to defend Gary Webb and his reporting from beginning to end.

At the Berkeley tribute, journalist Dennis Bernstein recalled being with Bob Parry and Gary Webb: "I remember the power that those guys had with audiences. It was easy to understand why people would be afraid of them. They were truth tellers."

### **The Birth of Consortium News**

As other western journalists were being pressured into compliance or driven out of the profession, Robert Parry chose a different path. Together with his oldest son Sam Parry, he launched the first investigative magazine on the internet: Consortium News. In his last article Bob Parry explained, "The point of Consortium News, which I founded in 1995, was to use the new medium of the modern internet to allow the old principles of journalism to have a new home, i.e., a place to pursue important facts and giving everyone a fair shake."

For the past 23 years, Consortium News has published consistently high quality research and analysis on international issues. To give just a few examples: In March 1999, Bob Parry surveyed the dangers of the Russian economic collapse cheered on by Western neoconservatives while Mark Ames exposed the reality of Russian economic gangsters. In February 2003, Consortium News published the First Memorandum to the President by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) after Colin Powell addressed the UN Security Council. VIPS presciently warned of “catastrophic” consequences if the US attacked Iraq.

In 2005, Bob Parry exposed the bias and deception behind the rush to blame the Syrian government after Lebanese leader Rafik Hariri was assassinated. In April 2011, as the US was pushing to overthrow Qaddafi in Libya, Parry drew parallels to the disastrous consequences of overthrowing the socialist leaning Afghan government three decades earlier.

Beginning in 2014, Bob Parry exposed the dubious accusations regarding the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH-17 in Ukraine. Over the past two years, Bob Parry wrote and edited dozens of articles exposing the bias and lack of evidence behind “Russia-gate”. A few examples can be seen here.

### **Commitment to Facts and Objectivity**

Sam and several other speakers at the Berkeley Tribute noted that Robert Parry was not ideological. He believed in following the leads and facts wherever they led. The new editor of Consortium News, Joe Lauria, said, “Bob was not a lefty radical... He didn’t start out from an ideological position or have a preconceived notion of what the story should be.”

Bob Parry’s investigations in the 1980’s revealed the U.S. administration plans and propaganda aiming to “glue black hats” on the Nicaraguan government and “white hats” on the Contra opposition. Thus he was well prepared to critically examine the disinformation campaigns accompanying “regime change” campaigns over the past decades: from Yugoslavia to Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine and others.

Under Bob Parry’s leadership, Consortium News has exposed “fake News” at the highest levels. As journalist Norman Solomon said at the tribute, “It’s important to remember that the most dangerous fake News in the last few decades has come from the likes of the front page of the New York Times and Washington Post. There are a million dead Iraqis and many dead Americans to prove it.”

### **Challenging the New McCarthyism**

In his last article, published just two weeks before his death, Parry informed Consortium News readers about his health issue. He speculated on possible contributing factors including “the unrelenting ugliness that has become

Official Washington and national journalism.”

Parry described the decline in journalistic standards and objectivity.

*“This perversion of principles – twisting information to fit a desired conclusion – became the modus vivendi of American politics and journalism. And those of us who insisted on defending journalistic principles of skepticism and even-handedness were increasingly shunned by our colleagues, a hostility that first emerged on the Right and among neoconservatives but eventually sucked in the progressive world as well... The demonization of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russia is just the most dangerous feature of this propaganda process – and this is where the neocons and the liberal interventionists most significantly come together. The US media approach to Russia is now virtually 100 percent propaganda.”*

At the Berkeley event, writer Natylie Baldwin addressed this issue,

*“Robert Parry referred to the phenomena of careerism and group think. He argued that it was ruining journalism ...When our most experienced academic expert on Russia, Stephen Cohen, can hardly get an interview on CNN and cannot get an op-ed published by the New York Times or the Washington Post, but a neo-con ideologue like Michael Weiss, who has no on the ground experience or educational credentials about Russia can be hired as a commentator by CNN on the subject, it’s dangerous. When someone like Rachel Maddow, who from her past investigative reporting knows better, has allowed herself to be used as a cartoonish purveyor of anti Russia propaganda, virtually ignoring coverage of more immediate issues facing average Americans and distracting them away from confronting the Democratic Party’s failures and dishonesty, it’s dangerous.”*

Baldwin elaborated on the current critical situation and need for honest and objective journalism. She said,

*“Our media, like our political system, is in crisis. Indeed, these two crises reinforce each other as both our media and our political system are corrupted by money and have been largely reduced to a cheap spectacle. According to polls, large majorities of millennials have contempt for these establishment institutions. They’re open to and looking for alternatives to these broken systems. This makes Robert Parry’s legacy and the space for genuine investigative journalism that he fostered at Consortium News more important than ever.”*

## Reflections on Bob Parry

The event began with messages of respect and appreciation by Alicia Jrapko of ResumenLatinoAmericano and Ann Garrison of Black Agenda Report. Ann Wright, former US Army Colonel and State Dept official, sent a video message hailing Bob Parry as one of the “truth-tellers”.

Following are excerpts from major presentations at the event.



**Dennis Bernstein**, Executive Producer of Flashpoints Radio, gave the first presentation. Dennis talked about his experience teaching journalism to high school students in the Bronx in 1984. The importance of investigative

journalism was underscored as Dennis' students investigated the police killing of a 67 year old grandmother named Eleanor Bumpers.

*"Bob Parry was investigating Iran Contra and we were investigating the police in the South Bronx. Because those kids were so dogged with their cameras and with their questions, their investigation led led to one of the only indictments of a police officer for manslaughter in the history of the city. It was their investigation that counteracted the big lie of the press."*

Dennis later worked as a reporter for *Newsday* covering the trial in Tucson Arizona of nuns in the sanctuary movement. There was a 'crazy colonel' from the White House, Oliver North, who was screaming the that nuns were getting in the way of national security and US foreign policy in El Salvador. "We were hearing a story about how this Oliver North was in fact part of this prosecution of these nuns and priests and church workers... they were all convicted."

*"There was a meeting in Washington DC towards the end of 1985 ... That's where I met Robert Parry...I began to follow the work of Robert Parry. I began to understand what it took to be a thorough journalist."*

*"Robert Parry was very special and you know, he rarely rejected pieces that I did, but when he did it was because he felt something wasn't true in the piece. He worked very hard to explain it to me or try and rewrite the piece to save the piece, but he was incredibly patient, incredibly focused..And he was very funny. One Halloween he dressed up as the ghost of William Casey. You all remember William Casey? Yeah. Well, that story. Iran Contra, the US government engaged in cocaine operations. The idea that the US government could be, at least in part, responsible for the flood of horrific drugs into communities across the country. Later on, I had an incredible chance to be with Gary Webb, Robert Parry and Pete Brewton, who broke the story about how the CIA was using S&Ls after they were deregulated to fund all kinds of illegal operations."*

*"I have a distinct memory of Bob trying to explain to Gary Webb who was riding high on breaking the Dark Alliance stories. He was convinced he had the full support of the leadership of the San Jose Mercury News. I remember Bob trying to caution Gary about how dangerous the story was and what could happen. Gary said he knew his editors were with him and that he had strong support. They were all cheering for Gary until the New York Times and Washington Post shredded him. Bob tried to warn him, tried to tell him.*

*But to be with them ... I remember the power that those guys – Bob, Gary Webb and Pete Brewton – had with audiences. It was easy to understand why people would be afraid of them. They were truth tellers. .... They were under attack then and they're under attack now. I am really troubled. I can't tell you how much I miss Bob."*

*"We lost them. We miss them. But Consortium News because of its power and as a tribute to Bob is continuing.*

*Thanks to its wonderful new editor, Joe Lauria, it continues. He's beginning to transform it. He's making his changes. He's expanding it. Best part, he is bringing in some wonderful new writers that really enhance the work there. So I miss Bob, I miss him every day, but Consortium News continues and continues stronger than ever."*

**Sam Parry**, oldest son of Robert Parry, flew in from the east coast to attend and

speaking at the event.



*"Thanks very much. I'm so honored to be here and I feel the weight of sort of this incredible crowd and the weight of my father here and the legacy that he created with Consortium News. I'm just so grateful to have you all here and to be part of this event and to do my part, to represent the family, to represent dad here. I know dad was a very humble man in many ways. He never wanted the limelight or the attention shown too brightly on him. He wanted the work to speak for itself, so I know part of him would be a little embarrassed by this great turnout, but another part of him, I know he's smiling. I can feel the smile on his face right now as I look out onto you all. So thank you all very much for coming out and thank you."*

*Dad chose a very difficult profession. Journalism is hard work. You're fighting to get the stories. You're fighting to get the truth. You have to write it down, you have to edit it, you have to make sure you're correct all the time. Dad always felt that he couldn't make a single mistake because if he did, they'd come after him even harder. So he worked really hard to get it all right. And he took a difficult path with his profession. He took on the mainstream as so many of you all have done with your careers as well, but he took on the mainstream. He was part of the mainstream and then he sort of had to confront them and fight for all the stories that he was able to bring forward.*

*And in doing so, he made himself sort of a target of, of retribution and attacks. And so he was attacked all the time. Every day by big, powerful institutions and big powerful people. He took it, but he took it because he had a community of supporters and like minded individuals, people who*

*understood the importance of telling the truth and speaking truth to power and that community of people are people just like you. You were his community, you were his, in many ways, his family, like minded travelers in this world.*

*I especially want to thank you all for being supporters of his, of his website, Consortium News.com and for coming out today, and this is just so beautiful."*

Sam described the early years of Consortium News. It began as a print publication: hand collated, stamped and mailed. At college Sam had learned about the burgeoning new "internet". When Bob discovered original documents proving the October surprise, Sam suggested they could scan the documents and post them for people to see online. Bob responded, "That's an interesting idea"... and thus was born the online Consortium News.

*"We didn't know what the heck we were doing in a lot of ways! We had dad's great journalism of course, but the rest of it we had to figure out as we went along.... Dad worked at this website for the next 23 years. Every single day he was tinkering away at it. He was gathering stories from many of you here in the room, and editing the stories, working with contributors to keep our truth alive. He felt so passionately about that..."*

*Something I wanted to share today is that dad was a patriot. I think that he really loved America. He loved our ideals, he loved the people, he loved the idea of holding the institutions that govern us accountable. Right? And that was his passion. That was what he was all about and that's what really drove him and propelled him through his life.*

*We're going to see a video of his life and hopefully you all will enjoy this and maybe it'll bring him to life a little bit more for you all. Thank you for being here." [This 10 minute video can be seen at 1:03:00 of the April Memorial Service [video](#). ]*

**Natylie Baldwin** is a Consortium News contributor and co-author of the book "[Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard: How the West was Checkmated](#)". She said,



*"I'd like to thank everyone for coming out today. I'd like to thank the organizers for inviting me to speak at a tribute to a man who was very inspirational to me. My own interest in foreign affairs began in college not long after I graduated, 9-11 happened. I joined the local peace movement to oppose our wars and it didn't take long for me to realize that the media is a big part of the problem.*



*"The Myth we're taught is that our democracy is underpinned by a media that serves as a watchdog on the government and other powerful institutions, a noble fourth estate. But when it comes to issues of war and the media, rarely if ever has the media served as a questioner of government claims, performing due diligence on a matter of life, death and destruction of societies. We saw the mainstream media's gross negligence with Iraq, Libya, and other examples stretching much further back.*

*"We are now seeing the same thing happened with the world's other nuclear superpower, Russia. I grew increasingly concerned about the degree of recklessness by US political elites who supported the coup in Kiev, completely disregarding Russia's security interests on its border.*

*"I began to dig deeper into post-Soviet Russia and US- Russia relations. I realized just how distorted and lacking in context the narrative Americans were being given, was during this time. One of the sources I relied on among others was Robert Parry and Consortium News. I also connected up with Sharon Tennyson, an independent writer and program coordinator with over three decades of experience on the ground all over Russia, including citizen to citizen diplomacy during Cold War One. She became my mentor and we traveled to*

*Russia in October of 2015 for two weeks where I was able to speak to a cross section of Russians in several different cities on a range of issues.*

*"We traveled to Crimea where I interviewed a range of Crimeans about what happened in late 2013 in early 2014. At this point, I had researched and co-authored a book about the Ukraine crisis providing historical and contextual background of US-Russia relations as well as writing articles for a couple of alternative outlets.*

*"I tried submitting articles about my on-the-ground observations and interviews in Crimea to several other alternative outlets in the hopes of getting this information out to a wider audience. After all, not many American writers had actually been to Crimea and could provide on-the-ground perspectives.*

*"I was having little luck. Somehow I got hold of Robert Parry's email address and submitted it to him. Within 48 hours my article was posted with many others to follow. I was even more pleasantly surprised when a couple of weeks later I received a check in the mail for my work. That is a big deal for independent writers these days.*

*"The money I earned from my articles for Consortium helped finance a return trip to Russia in 2017 and more articles. Bob said that journalism required the acknowledgement that there were usually two sides and possibly more to every story and that Americans needed to hear both sides. It's critical to have an informed citizenry with a reasonable understanding of issues in a democracy. This is especially true with issues that most average Americans don't have practical experience with, such as international policies relating to other countries. In order to conduct a rational foreign policy, one must understand the other country's point of view. It doesn't mean one must agree with it, but we must know how the other side perceives its own interests so that we can determine what they may be willing to risk or sacrifice on behalf of those perceived interests. Further, it's essential to determine areas of common interest in cooperation.*

*"Our media, like our political system, is in crisis. Indeed, these two crises reinforce each other as both our media and our political system are corrupted by money and have been largely reduced to a cheap spectacle. According to polls, large majorities of millennials have contempt for these establishment institutions. They're open to and looking for alternatives to these broken systems. This makes Robert Parry's legacy and the space for genuine investigative journalism that he fostered at Consortium News more important than ever with strong leadership and a continued quality of long form journalism from its current and new contributors, we can make a much needed*

*difference at this critical time. Thank you."*



**Joe Lauria** has been a contributing writer to Consortium News for many years. He was recently hired to become the site's new Editor-in-Chief. He spoke about the legacy of Bob Parry and his plans to continue and expand Consortium News.

*"Bob was not a lefty radical.... He was just reporting the facts and where they lead. ... He didn't start off from an ideological position. He didn't have a preconceived notion of what the story should be."*

*"This is an age of narcissism, not only in the White House, but across the social media landscape. Self promotion is widespread in media. But that was not what Bob Parry was about. He was obsessed, but not with himself whatsoever, but with the story and getting the facts out and holding government accountable...In one C-Span interview he says that that when you hold government to account, it's misunderstood as anti-Americanism. I think he was very pro American as Sam pointed out... He was a patriot because he believed in the people of this country, not the government, and believed in holding them to account."*

*"I was covering the lead up to the invasion of Iraq at the UN Security Council. I was just reporting the facts and the facts were that even US allies such as France and Germany joined with Russia and China to block the resolution that the US administration, George W Bush's administration, was seeking. They had made up their minds to invade anyway. They were going through the motions at the Security Council, seeing if they can get this resolution and if they couldn't, they were going to do it anyway."*

*So I wrote these stories for a Canadian chain which was called Southam News. They published the Montreal Gazette, Ottawa citizen, Calgary Herald and Vancouver Sun. I had been writing for them for since 1999. But I got a call*

one day from the foreign editor of this chain and he told me that his son was a Marine, a Canadian Marine, and that I had to support the war and that my reporting was not supporting the war. I said to him I'm sure you are proud of your son, but that's not my job. My job is to report what's going on about the opposition to this resolution. They never got the resolution, but they got their war.

"Bob was a skeptic, but not a cynic. And there's a big difference there. And you know, he really believed in a nonpartisan principled approach to journalism. And we're living in such a partisan age right now, and you could feel it in the air in Washington where I'm now living, and he had no time for that.

Even if you're an American citizen, when you become a reporter, you're not reporting as an American citizen, you're a reporter and all countries in a complex international crisis need to be equally reported on to let the reader know what each country's interests are, because it is interests that motivate governments when nations clash.

That's tremendous drama for journalism to report on. But instead of letting the reader understand the complexities of these situations the established media say one side is right and portray all the sides as the enemy. It became clear to me that when I worked at the Wall Street Journal that the corporate media does not have this objective view of international reporting. They're promoting an American agenda abroad. That is not journalism. That's not their job, and when you do that, when you suppress the voices of Iranians and Palestinians and Russians and North Koreans, you are dehumanizing these people and that makes it easier to go to war against them.

The American public doesn't get to understand or know anything about Palestinians as people who were just slaughtered at the gates of Gaza.

Bob Parry knew that and he got slammed for that. But we're all very thankful that he started Consortium News because he understood the power of the press is distinct from the power of government.

Too many reporters live vicariously through the power of government. They want that kind of power. So they suck up to it. They want access of course, but they sort of identify with the powerful rather than what the people. They're supposed to be the filter between the government and the people. Bob Understood that there's three parties here, there's government, there's the press and there's the public and we're supposed to be in the middle protecting the public from the lies of government. We are not seeing that now, but this is what I'm committed to try to continue doing at Consortium News.

*I was asked to talk about the future of Consortium News. So I've been there six weeks now and it's an enormous responsibility. I am extremely grateful to the board for hiring me, to have faith in me to do this job. I'm well aware that it's impossible to try to do it as Parry did. I'm not trying to do that. I'm doing what I can do.*

*I've changed the appearance here or there to spruce it up, as Dennis said, and also to have more diverse voices in the paper. For example, Margaret Kimberly of Black Agenda Report wrote a wonderful piece for us on the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination. I'm looking to get correspondents in various countries around the world. We need Middle Eastern Arabs to write about their countries. I want more people from around the world writing about their own countries in their own voices. We have recently published Asad Abu Khalil – the Lebanese "Angry Arab" blogger who knows the region extremely well, better than almost any Western analyst could. So those are the kinds of voices I'm trying to bring.*

*I'm trying to revive a field of reporting that was very well established for decades in the United States and that has disappeared and that is labor reporting. I understand the unions have shrunk but even where unions don't exist, workers exist. So we're going to cover workers and the issues that they're facing. I'm looking for more stories on the struggles of women in Africa, the Middle East and India and how they are struggling for their rights.*

*I just want to thank everybody for being here today. Thank you.*



**Norman Solomon** is a well-known author and journalist. He spoke of his experience

with Bob and his legacy.

*"Hearing the discussion a few minutes ago about fake news, it's so important to remember that the most dangerous fake news in the last few decades resulted in a million or more dead Iraqis and many dead Americans. The most dangerous fake news has come from the likes of the front page of The New York Times and the Washington Post. That's just a reality. It's not about ideology or rhetoric it is just cold, hard life and death fact.*

*Bob was somebody who had not only the curiosity that was constant to try to find out more, but also a tremendous work ethic. It was just part of who he was. I had the very good fortune to work with him on a series of articles about Colin Powell. Bob and I worked on a series of articles that are still archived on Consortium, about Powell. The more we looked into it, the more we saw the tremendous gap between the positive coverage and that from the beginning of his career in Vietnam, Powell always took that expedient path, the expedient way of getting along to get along with the powerful who could give him promotions. In working with Bob, a couple of aspects have always stayed with me very strongly. One is that he would frequently say as we were trying to go through material, that I have to master the information. I have to master the material....He was very insistent. You know, it's sort of like you don't pull it out of the oven before it's baked. We can't rush these stories. We've got to know that it's nailed down and solid and we've really dug. And the other aspect I remember is how generous he was on a professional basis. In this multipart series that we did, Bob ended up doing the vast amount of the work but he insisted my name by on every article byline. Sad to say that's not that common.*

*Bob was not about his name in lights. It was about, "Let's get the work done."*

Norman described how Bob was aware of the areas that mainstream journalists shouldn't touch, but he went there regardless.

*"Almost all mainline journalists obey that unspoken directive that is accepted, internalized: Don't go there. And Bob went there and he*

went there again and again. As his book "Fooling America" points out, he had to go to speak, pay a price. I remember him telling me a number of years ago when he was hammering on the Israeli role in US foreign policy and then writing about Russia, one of his colleagues, top colleagues, somebody who was in the press corps in DC who was a high editor at that point at the New York Times, said to him, 'Bob, you're losing credibility. You keep this up. You're going to marginalize yourself.' But Bob had crossed that Rubicon a long time earlier.

Norman spoke of previous fearless American journalists like George Seldes and IF Stone.

Bob Parry exemplified the attitude of: show me. I'm not going to assume that this is truthful because I might have a favorable view of this government or might assume that because other journalists are reporting it, it is received wisdom, I'm not going to take any of that on faith. If you want to go on faith, go to a house of worship.

One day toward the end of December I looked at Consortium News and saw that Bob had suffered a stroke. Then, a number of days later, there was an article by Bob. As I read it, there was a tremendous wave of feeling that it was, what's the French word, a *cri de coeur*. I later learned how extremely difficult it was just physiologically for Bob to write it.

It's one of the greatest articles about journalism I have ever read. My friend and often collaborator on articles, Jeff Cohen, said to me 'That article by Bob Parry should be assigned and read by every journalism student in America.' It's about independent journalism. It's about the herd mentality that has gotten to so many journalists in this country. Pseudo journalists, supposedly journalists, and editors run with the crowd and independent journalism is the opposite of running with the crowd. It's about holding that lantern high and saying, we have work to do and let's do it together. Thank you."

At the end of the event, participants purchased copies of Robert Parry's books "Fooling America" (1992), "Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, The Press & Project Truth" (1999), and "America's Stolen Narrative: From Washington and Madison to Nixon, Reagan and the Bushes to Barack Obama" (2012).

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## In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in March discussed recent changes in the Trump administration and examined the lasting impact of the U.S. invasion of Iraq as that event reached its 15th anniversary.

["Italy's Choice: Shock or Stagnation"](#) by Andrew Spannaus, Mar. 2, 2018

["Katharine Gun's Risky Truth-telling"](#) by Sam Hussein, Mar. 2, 2018

["Why Putin's Latest Weapons Claims Should Scare Us"](#) by Jonathan Marshall, Mar. 3, 2018

["How 'Operation Merlin' Poisoned U.S. Intelligence on Iran"](#) by Gareth Porter, Mar. 3, 2018

["The Rise of the New McCarthyism"](#) by Robert Parry, Mar. 9, 2018

["The Illusion of War Without Casualties"](#) by Nicolas J.S. Davies, Mar. 9, 2018

["Who's Afraid of Talking With Kim Jong Un?"](#) by Jonathan Marshall, Mar. 10, 2018

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["Torture-Tainted Nominations Recall Failure to Prosecute Bush-Era Abuses"](#) by Nat Parry, Mar. 14, 2018

["Acceptable Bigotry and Scapegoating of Russia"](#) by Natylie Baldwin, Mar. 15, 2018

["'Hostiles' and Hollywood's Untold Story"](#) by Jada Thacker, Mar. 16, 2018

["Behind Colin Powell's Legend – My Lai"](#) by Robert Parry and Norman Solomon, Mar. 17, 2018

["McCabe: A War on \(or in\) the FBI?"](#) by Coleen Rowley, Mar. 18, 2018

["Iraq +15: Accumulated Evil of the Whole"](#) by Nat Parry, Mar. 19, 2018



["Senate Votes to Continue Yemen Devastation"](#) by Dennis J. Bernstein, Mar. 22, 2018

["The Iraq War and the Crisis of a Disintegrating Global Order"](#) by Inder Comar, Mar. 22, 2018

["How Many Millions of People Have Been Killed in America's Post-9/11 Wars? – Part One: Iraq"](#) by Nicolas J.S. Davies, Mar. 22, 2018

["6,700 More U.S. Missiles for Saudi Arabia to Shoot at Yemeni Kids"](#) by Ann Wright, Mar. 24, 2018

["Trump Should Withdraw Haspel Nomination, Intel Vets Say"](#) by Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, Mar. 25, 2018

["Same Old Media Parade: Why Are Liberals Cheering?"](#) by Jeff Cohen, Mar. 26, 2018

["The Rush to a New Cold War"](#) by Robert Parry, Mar. 30, 2018

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## Acceptable Bigotry and Scapegoating of Russia

Exclusive: The scapegoating of Russia has taken on an air of bigotry and ugliness, based largely on Cold War-era stereotypes. In this article, Natylie Baldwin counters this intolerance with some of her positive impressions having traveled the country extensively.

By Natylie Baldwin

Over the last year and a half, Americans have been bombarded with the [Gish Gallop](#) claims of Russiagate. In that time, the most reckless comments have been

made against the Russians in service of using that country as a scapegoat for problems in the United States that were coming to a head, which were the real reasons for Donald Trump's upset victory in 2016. It has even gotten to the point where irrational hatred against Russia is becoming normalized, with the usual organizations that like to warn of the pernicious consequences of bigotry silent.

The first time I realized how low things would likely get was when Ruth Marcus, deputy editor of the *Washington Post*, sent out the following [tweet](#) in March of 2017, squealing with delight at the thought of a new Cold War with the world's other nuclear superpower: "So excited to be watching *The Americans*, throwback to a simpler time when everyone considered Russia the enemy. Even the president."



Not only did Marcus's comment imply that it was great for the U.S. to have an enemy, but it specifically implied that there was something particularly great about that enemy being Russia.

Since then, the public discourse has only gotten nastier. Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper – who notoriously [perjured](#) himself before Congress about warrantless spying on Americans – [stated](#) on Meet the Press last May that Russians were uniquely and "genetically" predisposed toward manipulative political activities. If Clapper or anyone else in the public eye had made such a statement about Muslims, Arabs, Iranians, Jews, Israelis, Chinese or just about any other group, there would have been some push-back about the prejudice that it reflected and how it didn't correspond with enlightened liberal values. But Clapper's comment passed with hardly a peep of protest.

More recently, [John Sipher](#), a retired CIA station chief who reportedly spent years in Russia – although at what point in time is unclear – was interviewed in Jane Mayer's recent *New Yorker* [piece](#) trying to spin the Steele Dossier as somehow legitimate. On March 6, Sipher took to Twitter with the following [comment](#): "How can one not be a Russophobe? Russia soft power is political warfare. Hard power is invading neighbors, hiding the death of civilians with chemical weapons and threatening with doomsday nuclear weapons. And they kill the opposition at home. Name something positive."

In fairness to Sipher, he did backpedal somewhat after being challenged;

however, the fact that his unfiltered blabbering reveals such a deep antipathy toward Russians (“How can one not be a Russophobe?”) and an initial assumption that he could get away with saying it publicly is troubling.

Glenn Greenwald re-tweeted with a comment asking if Russians would soon acceptably be referred to as “rats and roaches.” Another person replied with: “Because they are rats and roaches. What’s the problem?”

This is just a small sampling of the anti-Russian comments and attitudes that pass, largely unremarked upon, in our media landscape.

There are, of course, the larger institutional influencers of culture doing their part to push anti-Russian bigotry in this already contentious atmosphere. *Red Sparrow*, both the book and the movie, detail the escapades of a female Russian spy. The story propagates the continued fetishization of Russian women based on the stereotype that they’re all hot and frisky. Furthermore, all those who work in Russian intelligence are evil and backwards rather than possibly being motivated by some kind of patriotism, while all the American intel agents are paragons of virtue and seem like they just stepped out of an ad for Nick at Nite’s How to be Swell.

The recent Academy Awards continued their politically motivated trend of awarding Oscars for best documentary to films on topics that just happen to coalesce nicely with Washington’s latest adversarial policy. Last year it was the *White Helmets* film to support the regime change meme in Syria. This year it’s *Icarus* about the doping scandal in Russia.

Similarly, *Loveless*, the new film by Russian director Andrey Zvyagintsev (director of *Leviathan*) is being reviewed – as Catherine Brown points out – by writers from the mainstream American media in a predictably biased fashion. The film focuses on the disintegration of a married Moscow couple’s relationship and the complicated web of factors involved which have tragic ramifications for the couple’s 12-year old son.

American reviewers manage to paint the factors detailed in the film that are prevalent in most modern capitalist cities (e.g. being self-centered, materialistic and preoccupied with technological gadgets) as somehow uniquely Russian sins. They also ignore a prominent character in the film that defies their negativity about modern Russia – a character that represents altruism and the growth of civil society in the country.

A common theme in all this is that Russia is a bad country and Russians can’t help but be a bunch of good-for-nothings at best and dangerous deviants at worst. Indeed, according to media depictions, sometimes they manage to be both

at the same time. But what they don't manage to be is positive, constructive or even complicated. Sipher knows that the average American has been deluged with this anti-Russian prejudice, as reflected in his challenge at the end of his initial tweet about the largest country, geographically at least, in the world: Name something positive.

### **Countering the Negative**

Most people know, at least in the abstract, that few individuals or groups are purely good or bad. Most are a complex combination of both. But many – including those who normally consider themselves to be open-minded liberals – have allowed their lizard brains to be triggered by the constant demonization of Russia in the hopes of taking down Trump whom they deem to be a disproportionate threat to everything they hold dear. So as a counterweight to all the negative constantly pumped out about Russia and to take Sipher up on his challenge, I will list some positive things about Russia and the contribution of the country and its people to the world.

### **Contemporary Russia's Domestic Policy**

Russia has one of the most educated populations in the world, universal health care for its people, a home ownership rate of 84%, strong gun control laws, no death penalty, 140 days of guaranteed maternity leave for women at 100% salary, and Moscow was just voted the 4th safest megacity in the world for women.

And, despite claims that are often repeated in corporate media and even by many in the alternative press, Russia has independent and critical voices in the print media. Even on television, which is heavily influenced by the Kremlin, the Western position is often given airtime by either pro-Western Russian critics or Westerners themselves. During both of my visits to Russia (in 2015 and 2017) I interviewed a cross-section of Russians who all confirmed that they had access to Western media through both satellite and the internet. Furthermore, while violence against journalists is a concern, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, journalist murders have decreased significantly under Putin compared to the era of Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s.

Am I saying that Russia is a utopia without any problems? No. Like most countries, it has plenty. Most Russians, including Putin, admit this. These problems include still significant poverty rates, comparatively low productivity and life expectancy, and corruption. But it is important to note the direction of trends, which are mostly positive since Putin took over. Under his leadership, poverty rates have been cut in half, life expectancy has increased by several years – especially among men who had suffered the worst mortality crisis since WWII, crime has dropped, pensions have increased and are paid

regularly, the unemployment rate has been around 5% for years, great investments in infrastructure and agriculture have been seen along with development throughout the country.

And that development has not just been seen in Moscow and St. Petersburg – the latter city which, by the way, culturally and architecturally rivals those in France and Italy.

There are plenty of medium-sized cities throughout Russia that are becoming well-developed and culturally engaging. As one example, during my 2015 trip, I visited Krasnodar, located in the Black Sea region. The rate of civic construction in the city during 2014 surpassed even Moscow. As a consequence of the challenges of this rapid development, the public felt that decisions were not being made with sufficient feedback from residents, several of whom got together and created a group called the Public Council which eventually found ways to get city authorities to listen to their concerns.

The group had received significant media attention, networked with youth groups and infrastructure specialists, and received foreign experts in urban planning, public arts, transportation and city marketing. They have also organized periodic clean-up and renovation days, which are sponsored by local businesses that donate use of equipment. Currently, they are working on the creation of protected green zones, including one that connects all of the city's hiking paths and another to connect its 16 lakes. They have received no opposition from the Russian government and have elicited the interest of other cities who want to model their approach to local issues.

While in Krasnodar I met a dozen or more professionals, from lawyers to engineers and doctors, who lived in the city and were part of another civic group engaged in charitable, conservation and youth programs. At one point, I took a walking tour of the city. In terms of architecture, I saw the old and the new side by side, including a large shopping center that was built around a large tower that had been there for generations that local residents saved from destruction by the mall planners, a square with controversial fountains, and a main thoroughfare that was closed to auto traffic, allowing pedestrians free reign. Couples – including some of mixed race, parents pushing baby strollers, and bicyclists – all wound their way through the streets as both Russian and American music was piped in and building walls on one side of the street for a stretch displayed delicate illustrations of Russian history.

Fifteen hundred miles away in the Ural mountain region, the city of Yekaterinburg – named after Catherine I – has the infamous distinction of being the place where Czar Nicholas II and his family were massacred by the Bolsheviks in 1918. On the site where the family's bodies were exhumed, a magnificent

Russian Orthodox Church has been erected and dedicated to the last royal family. Nearby is the Yeltsin Library, denoting the Russian Federation's first President, although his legacy is not popular in Russia today.

The city is also home to a wide variety of precious metals and gems, along with a thriving economy. According to Sharon Tennison, an independent program coordinator who has traveled there numerous times over the past 15 years, hundreds of new apartment blocks can be seen on the outskirts of the city to accommodate the recent economic and population growth.

Yekaterinburg has a bustling cultural life that includes an opera house, a ballet, numerous theaters and museums, as well as dozens of libraries. In this respect, the city has continued its preoccupation with the classical arts as in Catherine's period. At the same time, many modern Russian rock bands with a distinctive sound have formed there (known as Ural rock).

The city also has a low rate of violence and crime.

As the New York Times and NPR like to point out and generalize out from, there are some rural and industrial areas in Russia that still need attention and investment. However, there are other towns in the countryside that are doing well.

### **Russia's Contributions to the World**

Russia has made many cultural and humanitarian contributions to the world. In the 18th and 19th centuries, imperial Russia produced some of the most renowned figures in the world of arts. These include writers, such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, whose works are often cited by American readers as among the greatest of all time; great composers include Tchaikovsky, Stravinsky and Rachmaninoff.

The country also has a rich history of pre-Soviet philosophers who debated questions of politics, history, spirituality and meaning. One of the most famous is Vladimir Solovyev, classified as belonging to the Slavophile school but distinguished from his fellow Slavophiles by his openness to and integration of several lines of thought.

He acknowledged the intuitive as well as the rational. He was friends with Dostoyevsky but had disagreements over Orthodoxy since Solovyev was an advocate of ecumenism and healing the schism between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. Furthermore, he is credited with influencing Nicolai Berdyaev, Rudolf Steiner and the Russian Symbolists, among others. He admired the Greek goddess Sophia who he characterized as the "merciful unifying feminine wisdom of God." Solovyev was adept at integrating several spiritual strands, such as Greek philosophy,

Buddhism, Kabbalah, and Christian Gnosticism.

Solovyev was famous for his debates with Slavophile contemporary, Nicolai Fedorov. In these and other writings, questions about morality and technological progress, how much humans should control nature, and prioritizing which problems to invest man's resources in solving were all given great consideration by Solovyev and are still relevant today, in both Russian society and the larger world.

It is interesting to note that, of all the early Slavophile philosophers, Putin chose Solovyev, the one who was the least strident and most open to the synthesis of differing values and viewpoints, as part of his assignment of books for Russia's regional governors to read a few years back. Of course, that didn't stop several western pundits – who showed they knew virtually nothing of Solovyev but perhaps some cherry-picked and out-of-context tidbits they'd found online – from distorting his writings, which naturally had to be horrible because Putin recommended them.

Moving on to the 20th century, it should not be forgotten that the Soviet Union bore the brunt of defeating the Nazis during WWII, losing 27 million people, and saw a third of their country destroyed in the process.

In the 21st century, Russia provided significant aid to Americans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Sandy. They also provided safe transport to Yemeni-Americans out of that devastated country after the U.S. State Department effectively abandoned them in 2015. Russia provided medical aid to 60,000 people affected by the Ebola epidemic in West Africa in 2014. Last September, Russia provided 35 tons of aid to earthquake victims in Mexico.

For someone who spent years in Russia as a professional expert working for the U.S. intelligence community, John Sipher is either not well-informed on his subject or is intentionally being disingenuous when it comes to the suggestion that Russia has done nothing positive, whether under Putin's governance or before.

### **The Purpose of Scapegoating Russia**

In early 2017, journalists Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes published a book called *Shattered: Inside Hillary Clinton's Doomed Campaign*. Largely based on interviews with insiders from Hillary Clinton's failed 2016 presidential campaign, the book was an attempt to analyze why she lost. The insiders agreed that Clinton had trouble providing a plausible explanation to voters as to why she was running other than that she simply wanted to be president. They also noted her trouble connecting with average Americans and her failure to campaign

in certain rust belt areas that Trump ultimately got support in. The book also states that within 24 hours of Clinton's loss, members of her campaign had decided to home in on the excuse of "Russian interference" to explain away her humiliating defeat.

In addition to a bloc of Clinton's supporters continuing to push this excuse for her loss and the ratings motive that channels like CNN and MSNBC have in continuing to milk the scandal, there is also Robert Mueller's investigation which has dragged on for over a year.

The most notable thing about the Mueller investigation to anyone who takes a sober look at it is its constantly evolving purpose. First, the purpose of the investigation was to find any evidence to support the allegation that Russia had hacked into the DNC's emails. When no substantial evidence could be found to support that allegation, the purpose evolved into collusion between Trump and Russia to steal the election on behalf of Trump.

When no substantial evidence could be found to support that allegation, the purpose evolved yet again into Russia influencing the election on behalf of Trump, possibly without his knowledge or participation. When no substantial evidence could be found to support that allegation and all that could be found was a paltry number of social media ad buys – many of which were purchased after the election or advocated conflicting positions or didn't even have anything to do with the election, the purpose became "sowing discord."

After all of this, we have an indictment against 13 private individuals who worked for a "troll farm" that had been exposed several years ago and is run by a caterer with no proven orchestration by Putin or the Kremlin. Mueller also knows that this indictment will never be legally tested because the 13 individuals will never be extradited and stand trial.

After all the shrieking and howling 24/7 for close to a year and a half that Trump was an illegitimate president installed by the Kremlin, this is the best Mueller and the mainstream Democrats can come up with. It's pretty obvious by now that this investigation has simply been feeding into the media and Democratic Party circus mentioned above rather than uncovering anything substantive with which to impeach Trump.

The 2016 election showed that the Democrats faced a sleeping giant that had been awakened – one that the Democratic Party had helped to create for decades by enabling lower living standards, outsourcing of good-paying jobs, the proliferation of low-wage jobs, unaffordable education, lack of health care coverage, public health problems, and decrepit infrastructure.



Consequently, there was a demand for meaningful policies that would help average Americans, policies that polls show they want. But mainstream Democrats will not deliver on such policies, like \$15/hour minimum wage, Medicare for All, and pulling out of our wars and investing the money saved in jobs and infrastructure. They won't deliver on these things for the same reason that Republicans won't deliver on them: because their donors don't want them to. But they are not going to admit that to the American people who were going to keep demanding, so they needed a scapegoat and a diversion.

It's a cheap trick that the political elite is using to appeal to the basest instincts of their fellow Americans while shoring up support for their most reckless tendencies in the area of foreign policy.

**Natylie Baldwin is co-author of *Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard & How the West Was Checkmated*, available from Tayen Lane Publishing. Since October of 2015, she has traveled to six 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, The New York Journal of Books, The Common Line, and the Lakeshore. She is currently submitting her first novel to agents and finishing a second. She blogs at [natyliesbaldwin.com](http://natyliesbaldwin.com).**

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## The Fallacy of Demonizing Russia

Today's demonization of Russia is especially offensive when viewed against the suffering of the Russian people that Natylie Baldwin recalled in a visit to the monument honoring the defense of Leningrad against a brutal Nazi siege.

By Natylie Baldwin

We entered the monument to the siege of Leningrad from the back. There is a large semi-circle with eternal flame torches at intervals and embedded sculptures of Lenin's face, and other symbols of the Soviet era. The monument was built in the post-war period so the Soviet iconography is understandable. In the middle is a sculpture of a soldier, a half-naked woman looking forlorn into the distance, and another woman collapsed on the ground with a dead boy in her arms.

There are several concentric steps that follow the semi-circle and I sat down on one of them and took in the feel of the area. Classical style music played in the background with a woman's haunting voice singing in Russian. It was

explained to me that it was a semi-circle instead of a full-circle to represent the fact the city was not completely surrounded and ultimately not defeated.

I finally got up and went through the opening in the semi-circle and came out to the front where a tall column with 1941 and 1945 on it stood with a large statue of two soldiers in front of it.

There are several statues on either side of the front part of the monument of figures, from soldiers to civilians, who labored to assist in alleviating the suffering of the siege and defending the city. Soldiers and civilians helped to put out fires, retrieve un-exploded ordnance from buildings, repair damage, and built the road of life over a frozen body of water to evacuate civilians and transport supplies.

The siege lasted 872 days (Sept. 8, 1941, to Jan. 27, 1944), resulting in an estimated 1.2 million deaths, mostly from starvation and freezing, and some from bombing and illness. Most were buried in mass graves, the largest of which was Piskarevskoye Cemetery, which received around 500,000 bodies. An accurate accounting of deaths is complicated by the fact that many unregistered refugees had fled to Leningrad before the siege to escape the advancing Nazi army.

According to [Wikipedia](#), by the end of the siege: "Only 700,000 people were left alive of a 3.5 million pre-war population. Among them were soldiers, workers, surviving children and women. Of the 700,000 survivors, about 300,000 were soldiers who came from other parts of the country to help in the besieged city."

We decided to go into the small museum attached to the Monument, which consisted of one large room. As you walk in after paying for your ticket, you see a series of glass cases that each contain artifacts from the siege with explanatory panels in both Russian and English.

My Russian friend Mike and I noted the Soviet propaganda-style language used in the panels. He said that if the museum had been done today, the language would be different. In any event, the basic information was readily understandable, if one ignored the glory-to-the-Soviet style wording.

On one wall was a large movie screen on which was projected a constant loop of two films that ran approximately 10 minutes each. One was footage of the siege in general and how it affected the residents and what the soldiers and civilians did to defend against it.

The second film focused on the massive deaths, including era footage of people pulling wrapped up corpses in make-shift sleds through the snow to the nearest mass pit for burial. In the center of the exhibit was a large square sculptured map of the city with the outline of the area that was surrounded by the Germans

lit up in red.

When we emerged from the darkness of the museum and monument, the sun was bright and it was probably one of the warmest days of the year in St. Petersburg. On the walk back to the car, I told Mike that I didn't think the average American could even begin to fathom this level of suffering. With the exception of a very small percentage of the population sent to fight our myriad and senseless conflicts, war is something that happens to other people somewhere else. It's an abstraction – or worse yet, fodder for entertainment.

Mike didn't respond to my verbal stream-of-consciousness. So we continued on in silence. But it all made me ponder how spoiled Americans have been in this respect, with a vast ocean on either side and weak or friendly neighbors to the north and south.

We have not experienced a war on our soil since the 1860's and have not suffered an invasion since 1812. I can't help but think that this, along with our youth, goes a long way toward explaining our lack of perspective and humility as a nation. Only those without wisdom would characterize themselves as "exceptional" and "indispensable."

Natylie Baldwin is co-author of *[Ukraine: Zbig's Grand Chessboard & How the West Was Checkmated](#)*, available from Tayen Lane Publishing. She blogs at [natyliesbaldwin.com](http://natyliesbaldwin.com).

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## In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in October focused on the problematic U.S. presidential campaign, revelations about U.S. alliances in the Middle East and the escalation of the New Cold War with Russia.

["How Arms Sales Distort US Foreign Policy"](#) by Jonathan Marshall, Oct. 1, 2016

["Clinton Shows a Dovish Side on Nukes"](#) by Jonathan Marshall, Oct. 2, 2016

["Trump's Blindness Toward Slavery, Jim Crow"](#) by Marjorie Cohn, Oct. 2, 2016

["Obama Warned to Defuse Tensions with Russia"](#) by Veteran Intelligence

Professionals for Sanity, Oct. 2, 2016

["Do We Really Want Nuclear War with Russia?"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 3, 2016

["Double Standards for Israel and Syria"](#) by Rick Sterling, Oct. 4, 2016

["The NYT's Neocon 'Downward Spiral'"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 4, 2016

["The Unmourned Plutonium Disposal Deal"](#) by Jonathan Marshall, Oct. 5, 2016

["New 'Group Think' for War with Syria/Russia"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 5, 2016

["The Joint US-Saudi Guilt for 9/11"](#) by Daniel Lazare, Oct. 6, 2016

["To Fight Global Warming, Canada Ponders a Carbon Tax"](#) by Jonathan Marshall, Oct. 6, 2016

["The Forgotten Libyan Lessons and the Syrian War"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 6, 2016

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["Extracting Lessons from Police Shootings"](#) by William John Cox, Oct. 9, 2016

["Low-Brow Debate Skirts Meaningful Issues"](#) by Joe Lauria, Oct. 10, 2016

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["Trump's Lies About a Nuke 'Gap'"](#) by Jonathan Marshall, Oct. 11, 2016

["Russia Reads US Bluster as Sign of War"](#) by Ray McGovern, Oct. 11, 2016

["Debate Moderator Distorted Syrian Reality"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 11,

2016

["The Life and Death of Hanoi Hannah"](#) by Don North, Oct. 12, 2016

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["The Unique Human Capacity for War"](#) by Michael Brenner, Oct. 21, 2016

["Finally, Letting the Philippines Go"](#) by Jonathan Marshall, Oct. 21, 2016

["Washington's New Lock-Step March of Folly"](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 22, 2016

["The 'White Helmets' Controversy"](#) by Rick Sterling, Oct. 23, 2016

["One Iraqi Family's Struggle Amid Chaos"](#) by Cathy Breen, Oct. 24, 2016

["Russia's Very Different Reality"](#) by Natylie Baldwin, Oct. 24, 2016

[“Clinton’s Slog Deeper into the Big Muddy”](#) by Robert Parry, Oct. 24, 2016

[“Women Call for Israel-Palestine Peace”](#) by Ann Wright, Oct. 25, 2016

[“US Impunity Erodes World Justice”](#) by Nicolas J.S. Davies, Oct. 25, 2016

[“Tom Hayden, Courageous Warrior for Peace”](#) by Marjorie Cohn, Oct. 26, 2016

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## 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](http://natyliesbaldwin.com).**

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## In Case You Missed...

Some of our special stories in August focused on the dangerous new Cold War with Russia, the serious problems with both major party candidates for U.S.

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"The Battle Over the Burkini" by Graham E. Fuller, Aug. 26, 2016

\*"The High Cost of American Hubris" by Natylie Baldwin, Aug. 26, 2016

"The Dumbed-Down New York Times" by Robert Parry, Aug. 27, 2016

"Abu Zubaydah: Torture's 'Poster Child'" by Marjorie Cohn, Aug. 28, 2016

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## The High Cost of American Hubris

Americans have paid a very high price for the Establishment's imperial ambitions, a price passing a breaking point in blood and money, a problem that must be addressed with realism and humility, explains Natylie Baldwin.

By Natylie Baldwin

Although renowned political scientist John Mearsheimer does not consider himself to be an isolationist – a term which has acquired a negative connotation since

WWII – his definition is illuminating as much for clarifying what the term does not mean as for what it does.

In *America Unhinged*, Mearsheimer writes: “Isolationism rests on the assumption that no region of the world outside of the Western Hemisphere is of vital strategic importance to the United States. Isolationists do not argue that America has no interests in the wider world, just that they are not important enough to justify deploying military force to defend them. They are fully in favor of engaging with the rest of the world economically as well as diplomatically, but they view all foreign wars as unnecessary.”

As Mearsheimer makes plain, isolationism does not constitute a lack of constructive engagement with the outside world, but a judicious engagement that eschews military action outside of defending the homeland.

At a time when Washington is experiencing the hubris of imperial overreach and the prospect of the eventual collapse that history shows is the inevitable endgame of all empires, it is time for concerned Americans across the political spectrum to begin to seriously consider what a new paradigm and policy platform representing sanity might look like.

It is in the U.S.’s long-term interests (as well as the rest of the world’s) to have stability. The bare minimum for stability is a lack of war.

As science writer John Horgan concluded in his book *The End of War* in which he undertook a scientific analysis of war via the study of history, anthropology, psychology and sociology, the old adage about justice being a prerequisite for peace is wrong. It is peace that is necessary for justice to take root. The violent, chaotic and wasteful conditions of modern war are not conducive to the pursuit of justice or human development.

Most Americans do not share the Neoliberal, Neoconservative, or Responsibility to Protect club’s messianic vision of an America that needs to recreate the world to fit some bastardized idea of imperial “democracy” that requires a Year Zero program to destroy the social, cultural and political foundations of target countries (see Iraq, Libya, and Syria).

The restoration of our democratic republic and the revitalization of our economy and society are intimately connected to pulling out of the militarist/imperialist projects that are killing our country, along with the casualties it is responsible for around the world. It was estimated last year by physicians’ groups that deaths in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan from the U.S. “war on terror” (USWOT) are 1.3 million at the conservative end.

The predictable blowback from friends and family members of those decapitated



and blown apart by drone strikes and indiscriminate bombings, as well as shootings by soldiers whose psyches have been warped by immersion in the hellhole of counter-insurgency wars that are unwinnable, should give all Americans serious pause in terms of rational problem-solving toward the goal of increasing the conditions for peace and stability.

The casualties from the physicians' groups does not even count the thousands dead in the Libyan civil war, precipitated by the US/NATO toppling of the Gaddafi government – a stable, secular government that had attained the highest standard of living in all of Africa – or our attempts to similarly support nihilistic jihadists who want to topple the Assad regime in Syria and the killing frenzy that has resulted in that country.

Other historians and political scientists, going further back in the American Empire's reign, have estimated 20 million to 30 million people have perished as a result of Washington's covert operations and overt military interventions that have occurred almost continuously since 1945.

Take a moment to let that really sink in. Each of those 20 million to 30 million was a living, breathing person who – like you and me – had hopes, dreams, fears and other people who loved them. With this track record, is it any wonder that the world views the U.S. as the biggest threat to world peace by a wide margin?

### **The Morally and Intellectually Bankrupt**

The U.S. needs to take the lead on de-militarizing and using the freed-up focus and resources to begin engineering a soft landing for the inevitable imperial/economic decline that we are already experiencing. By any rational measure, our interventions have been disasters, creating more problems than they solve. There is a reason why we are known in other parts of the world as “The Empire of Chaos.”

We use our military to relentlessly kill and destroy because our political leaders no longer have the will or imagination to build something constructive. Militarism is the refuge of the morally and intellectually bankrupt.

With a Pentagon budget that comprises 54 percent of the discretionary budget – not counting the black budget expenditures of intelligence agencies estimated at an additional \$52 billion annually – this is 4 percent more than 1990 levels – the time at which the late expert on the military industrial complex, Seymour Melman, made the following observation:

“The American ruling class, by 1990, has become a state/corporate managerial entity. Together they control the military-industrial complex. ... The war

economy, in the service of extending the decision power and wealth of America's state and corporate managers, has been consuming the US civilian infrastructure. Roads, bridges, the water supply, waste disposal systems, housing, medical care facilities, schools are in disrepair from coast to coast."

Currently, the number one spender on the military at approximately 50 percent of the world total, we are also set to spend \$1 trillion on an updated nuclear arsenal, partly justified by a rivalry with the Russian Federation, a face-off that is recognized as largely contrived by those who have a true understanding of post-Soviet U.S.-Russia relations.

As a nuclear superpower that enjoys the protection of vast oceans on both its shores and relatively cordial relations with our neighbors to the north and south, the U.S. has not experienced a war on its soil for 150 years and the Civil War did not involve any foreign invasion.

Further, according to research last year by ex-CIA agent Philip Giraldi, only two Americans died overseas in terrorist attacks outside of war zones and only 26 deaths occurred domestically from jihadist terrorism since 9/11 – averaging less than two deaths per year. If we add to that the deaths from the attacks in San Bernadino and Orlando, the total is 91. This is fewer than the number of victims of domestic terrorists.

So how does a virtually non-existent threat of invasion or the issue of terrorism justify billions of dollars wasted on militarism, thousands of deaths and injuries of American military personnel and millions more non-Americans (mostly civilians), and loss of civil liberties? Where is the logic and conscience in this equation?

Given the fact that Russian leaders Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev have reached out repeatedly since 2000 to cooperate toward the resolution of security issues that would include and respect everyone's interests on the greater European continent, coupled with the fact that any terrorist threat from Middle East jihadists has been greatly magnified, if not initiated, by Washington's militarist policies in that region, it is safe to say that our country's policymakers have the capability to greatly minimize what little foreign threat there may be to the U.S. through a shift in policy.

It is incumbent upon the U.S. to make this shift as its policy actions over the past 25 years have created or exacerbated the worst problems of instability in the international arena. Moreover, these policies have done so by running up an astronomical debt to foreign countries that the policies are now working to antagonize.

U.S. policymakers have done all this at the expense of the well-being of the majority of Americans by wasting huge sums of money that could be used to improve our D+ level infrastructure, to raise our medical standards from the bottom of the industrialized world and to address the true unemployment rate of 23 percent.

## **Costs of US Imperialism and Militarism**

### *Military Bases and Blowback*

The U.S. currently has hundreds of military bases on every continent except Antarctica, costing \$250 billion annually to maintain. Ironically, these bases tend to create the need for still more bases. They promote resentment in areas where American GI's live in pampered bubbles, located on prime real estate, and in culturally divergent ways relative to the natives.

At the time that Chalmers Johnson wrote *The Sorrows of Empire* in 2004, the Department of Defense (DOD) publicly acknowledged 725 bases around the world, although there were understood to be significantly more due to secrecy and various means of obscuring the presence of a military installation by using euphemisms in different documents (e.g. in connection with Israel).

Despite the official tally by the DOD having dropped somewhat in recent years, there are undoubtedly many more bases now with the accession of nine more countries to NATO, along with bombing campaigns extended to several more countries and covert military operations expanded into numerous others as well as the proliferation of smaller "lily pad" style bases.

As Chalmers Johnson wrote (p. 152): "There is something else at work, which I believe is the post-Cold War discovery of our immense power, rationalized by the self-glorifying conclusion that because we have it, we deserve to have it. The only truly common elements in the totality of America's foreign bases are imperialism and militarism – an impulse on the part of our elites to dominate other peoples largely because we have the power to do so, followed by the strategic reasoning that, in order to defend these newly acquired outposts and control the regions they are in, we must expand the areas under our control with still more bases.

"To maintain its empire, the Pentagon must constantly invent new reasons for keeping in our hands as many bases as possible long after the wars and crises that led to their creation have evaporated. As the Senate Foreign Relations Committee observed as long ago as 1970: 'Once an American overseas base is established it takes on a life of its own. Original missions may become outdated but new missions are developed, not only with the intention of keeping the

facility going, but often to actually enlarge it.’”

Billions of dollars are spent annually on constructing and maintaining these bases just in the Middle East where estimates of the number of military bases in Afghanistan alone had ranged up to 411 at one point. Bases in this region are mostly on behalf of the goal of protecting Persian Gulf oil supplies. Indeed, \$40 trillion is estimated to have been spent on this over the past 40 years.

This begs a couple of questions: (1) wouldn't it be cheaper and more humane to simply invest in energy efficiency and renewables that would create American jobs? (2) or, how about just paying a fair market price for these fossil fuels? Regardless of any particular regime's rhetoric against the U.S. or the West, they'd still want to make money at the end of the day. Not to mention, we'd be supporting the concept of markets, which we claim to hold in such high esteem as to border on the religious.

Moreover, as Michael Scheuer, former CIA specialist on the Middle East for 22 years, argues persuasively, one of the primary reasons that young Muslim males in the region are motivated to blow themselves up in terrorist actions against the U.S. is due to the presence of American military bases on sovereign and Muslim lands. Virtually no Muslims – no matter how radical – are motivated to commit such acts because of the way we live within our own borders.

### **American Victims of Empire**

Over 7,000 American military personnel have lost their lives so far in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, 56 percent of veterans are receiving treatment with the VA, half have applied for permanent disability and a third are being treated for PTSD, anxiety, and/or depression. Some 250,000 have suffered a traumatic brain injury and close to 2,000 have had limbs amputated. Approximately 175,000 veterans are 70 – 100 percent disabled. It is estimated that care and compensation for veterans of these wars over the coming decades will reach \$1 trillion.

The overall cost of these wars is projected to be \$6 trillion, enough for every American household to receive \$75,000. Although, military investment does produce some jobs, investment in other sectors of the economy, like healthcare, would produce far more.

According to geopolitical analyst, Conn Hallinan, “We spend more on our ‘official’ military budget than we do on Medicare, Medicaid, Health and Human Services, Education, and Housing and Urban Development combined.”

In fact, if that \$6 trillion spent on wars in the Middle East was to be invested in projects that improved Americans' lives, we could achieve the following and

still have some left over:

1. Completely upgrade our ailing infrastructure (\$3.6 trillion);
2. Invest the upfront costs to implement the Stanford University plan for 100 percent renewable energy in the U.S. by 2050, creating almost 6 million jobs over 40 years in the process (\$350 billion\*);
3. Expand Medicare to cover all Americans (\$394 billion);
- 4 Double the salary of all high school teachers (\$80 billion)

Instead, we have the budgetary sinkhole that has become the security state; simultaneously, our politicians have implemented major tax cuts for the wealthy. The result over the past 15 years is that we have witnessed the largest transfer of money upward to the wealthiest segment of our society.

Four hundred Americans now have more wealth, totaling \$2 trillion, than 50 percent of all Americans combined. We have also officially become an oligarchy, where only corporations and the super wealthy are able to influence policy.

What are the implications of this chasm in socioeconomic equality in terms of America's security?

### **Inequality and Domestic Security**

In their seminal 2009 book, *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger*, epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett explain their findings from years of research on social inequality and its relationship to the security of societies.

Based on studies of the wealthiest nations (market democracies), societies that have greater disparities of wealth – and, hence, social status – tend to experience lower levels of well-being and stability as indicated by the following criteria: 1) lower levels of trust among members of society, 2) higher rates of mental illness and addiction, 3) lower life expectancy and higher infant mortality rates, 4) more obesity, 5) lower children's educational performance, 6) higher teenage births, 7) more homicides, 8) high incarceration rates, and 9) less social mobility.

These trends held regardless of the overall wealth of the societies involved. More equality made between 3 and 10 times a difference in well-being and social security when comparing the market democracies of the world.

Let's look at how the U.S. rates on these criteria:

- 1) Only 1/3 of Americans trust others, according to a 2013 AP-GfK poll

- 2) The U.S. has the highest rate of mental illness, including addiction, in the world (WHO)
- 3) Life expectancy for the U.S. is 26th out of the 36 OECD nations, while the U.S. also has the worst infant mortality rate in the West (CDC)
- 4) According to a study published by The Lancet in 2014, the US is the most obese nation on the planet
- 5) The U.S. ranks 36<sup>th</sup> in the world for educational performance
- 6) The U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the developed world (CDC)
- 7) The U.S. ranks first in homicide rates in the western world and seventh for the entire world
- 8) The U.S. has the highest incarceration rate of any nation on earth, both in terms of the per capita rate and the overall number of people locked up
- 9) A child born into poverty in the U.S. today has a 33 percent chance of moving up the socioeconomic ladder, compared to a 50 percent chance in 1946

As it turns out, America is indeed exceptional, but not in the way President Obama would like everyone to believe.

Wilkinson and Pickett also found that, although the poorest of the population reaped the most benefits from equalization measures, the entire population benefited to some degree from more equality. Furthermore, it was recognized that past a certain level, increases in material gain did not produce more happiness or well-being among people. In other words, once a person's basic needs were satisfied comfortably, there was a law of diminishing returns for acquiring more wealth or material goods.

Another point that was made by the authors was that societies did not need to follow only one model to achieve more equality. What mattered was that there were effective mechanisms of some kind in place to facilitate more equality in a society. At the time of the book's publication, there were two models recognized among the market democracies: the Scandinavian model of social welfare programs provided by the state and the Japanese model that encouraged less disparity in incomes between different levels of society, obviating the need for many state welfare programs.

For example, as of 2013, American CEO's made 354 times as much as the average worker, whereas Japanese CEO's made only 67 times as much as the average worker.

## **Solutions to the Problems**

## *Money Out of Politics*

In 2014, Princeton Professor Martin Gilens and Northwestern University Professor Benjamin Page published a study in which they determined, through quantitative analysis of 1,779 policy issues, that average Americans and organizations representing the interests of average Americans have virtually no influence over public policy at the national level.

Policy is dictated by large corporations, the super wealthy and the organizations and lobbyists who represent them, mostly due to the huge sums of money they are able to contribute, directly or indirectly, to political campaigns.

To end this institutionalized bribery, money must be removed from politics. A constitutional amendment must be passed to clarify once and for all that corporations are not human beings and that money is not speech.

There are significant efforts underway for such an amendment. Move to Amend is working toward pressuring Congress to introduce and pass such an amendment; while, Wolf PAC is an organization working to get enough state legislatures to call a constitutional convention to introduce and pass an amendment.

Media outlets that rent out our public airwaves for profit must provide free air time to election candidates, eliminating the need for candidates to buy advertising.

## *Reign in the Military Industrial Complex*

During WWII, Senator Harry Truman presided over the Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, which investigated waste, inefficiency, and war profiteering. When Truman received word that a company might be engaged in such behavior, he would drive out and pay surprise visits to the company. He would investigate aggressively and, according to The Nation, his work prompted President Franklin Roosevelt to support increasing “the excess profits tax to 90% and charg[ing] the Office of War Mobilization with the task of eliminating illegal profits.”

The Pentagon, which can't pass an audit and can't properly account for billions of dollars over the years, also routinely does business with defense contractors that have the most fraud and misconduct claims against them, such as Lockheed Martin, Boeing and KBR.

An independent commission should be impaneled to investigate war profiteering, waste, fraud and misconduct. The commission should have the authority and expectation to act on its findings rather than just issuing a report that will

be ignored. An attitude that corporations that intentionally commit fraud and misconduct in relation to military contracts as well as lobbying to have American troops put in harm's way for wars that have nothing to do with defending the homeland would be considered unpatriotic at best and treasonous at worst. Political lobbying by military contractors should be outlawed and military personnel should go back to providing services for themselves such as cooking meals, cleanup and latrine duty.

A moratorium should be placed on any new military bases or expansion of existing ones. Gradual dismantling of military bases should follow based on the criteria of the necessity of defending the homeland. Simultaneously, there should be a halt to NATO expansion.

The U.S. should work with Europe and Russia toward a new, inclusive security architecture for Europe where the U.S. is a partner, not a dominator. This would eliminate the pretext of the U.S. needing to provide the majority of Europe's security.

The operations portion of the CIA should be dissolved as well as the National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Both of these organizations have a documented history of being too vulnerable to abuse by the Executive Branch outside of its constitutional mandate.

The money and arms faucet to Israel needs to be turned off. Washington should make it clear to Tel Aviv that Israel will no longer be indulged like a spoiled child with no responsibilities. The baton needs to be passed to other institutions and nations to broker a peace plan between Israel and Palestine. Russia, China, the U.N. or a combination thereof would be in a better position to do so.

*A Peace Dividend for the U.S.*

The money saved from the above measures could fund a New Deal type program to invest in renewable energy, obviating the "need" for wars over access to oil and gas, shipping lanes and pipelines. It could also provide other basic social infrastructure that would raise the American standard of living equivalent to the rest of the Western world.

We could also incentivize the re-industrialization of our economy toward the self-sufficient production of essential goods. Funding and tax policies could facilitate local food production and manufacturing. This would encourage food security, jobs that cannot be outsourced, increased environmental accountability and fair trade focused on surplus and non-essential goods.

**Conclusion**



These are all policies that traditional Burkean conservatives and green-minded progressives can agree on: anti-imperialism, more economic self-sufficiency, energy independence, restoration of civil liberties and an end to corporate crony capitalism and its buying of the political system.

We must accept the fact that we are one country among many – a country that can still be a great nation – but we are not exceptional and we are not God. Such a belief stems from a cultural narrative deeply rooted in the particular brand of Calvinist/Puritan Protestantism that shaped the U.S. from its pioneer days. It has expressed itself through Manifest Destiny in the 19th century, “Leader of the Free World” against the “Evil Empire” in the 20th century, and the Exceptionalist/Indispensable Nation of the 21st century.

Most Americans will accept stepping down off this messianic pedestal if they have gained the true confidence that an increase in their standard of living would provide and if they are not manipulated and fed a constant diet of propaganda by politicians and corporate media on behalf of the interests of a craven and militaristic oligarchy.

Instead, Americans and their leaders would be working together to implement practical and concrete policies to improve Americans’ lives and foster the cooperation and stability in the international arena that will translate into genuine long-term security for the US.

Space must be provided for other regions and multilateral institutions to figure out how to restore stability. The rest of the world can figure out how to solve their own regional problems and govern themselves if given the space to evolve toward this goal. The world will not fall apart if the U.S. pulls back, gets its own house in order and endeavors to lead by example.

*\*\$350 billion was figured by taking the high end annual estimate for National Renewable Energy Laboratory’s “80% renewable by 2050,” adding on an additional 20% and multiplying by 35 years.*

**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](http://natyliesbaldwin.com). [An earlier version of this article first appeared at [OpEd News](#)]**

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## Russia Pushes Back on NATO Expansion

As NATO presses up to Russia's borders – with secret schemes to influence and absorb unwilling populations – Russia has begun to push back, explaining the

origins of the new Cold War, as Natylie Baldwin describes.

By Natylie Baldwin

Can Russian President Vladimir Putin turn the tables on NATO and the European Union in the Balkan states that are not yet members of the Atlanticist project? According to Filip Kovacevic, a political science professor who specializes in Russia and Eastern Europe, Putin has a plan. Some details were provided in an exclusive report in May on the nascent project by Russia to counter NATO expansion into the remaining Balkan countries that have not yet been swept into the Western alliance.

The plan has its origins in the grassroots movement that arose in the aftermath of the first Cold War, which called for non-alignment and cooperation with both East and West. Kovacevic describes the movement as follows:

“Their members were generally young people who were enthusiastic, honest and genuinely committed to the public good, but were plagued by the lack of funding and faced with frequent media blackout and open discrimination. Nonetheless, their programs articulated the most promising and humane geopolitical vision for the Balkans. They conceptualized the Balkans as a territorial bridge between the West and the East rather than as the place of persistent confrontation, or the ‘line of fire’ as formulated by the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in 2015. They wanted the Balkans to become a force for peace and human dignity in the world. Their vision still remains the best option for the Balkans people.”

This desire for non-alignment is understandable as a continuation of the policy of Tito’s Yugoslavia during the Cold War – the nation that several of the modern day Balkan states were a constituent part of. However, according to Kovacevic, these groups were easily overwhelmed, in terms of both financial and propaganda resources, in the 1990s by pro-NATO forces in the West.

In addition to providing resources to build up pro-NATO sentiment in the media and NGO sectors of these countries, financial resources and pressure was used to sway a large number of politicians to favor NATO membership, often in opposition to the general population’s views. Some of the unsavory forms of incentive or pressure include what amounts to blackmail and bribery, Kovacevic told me in an email interview:

“This is a long-term process. In the U.S. intelligence community it is called ‘seeding.’ The intelligence scholar Roy Godson defines it as ‘identifying potential agents of influence’ at an early stage and then acting to advance their careers. This is typically done covertly, but there have been the historical examples of overt support. ...

“In the Balkans, the key role in the process of ‘seeding’ was accomplished by various institutes, conferences, retreats, grants, etc. For instance, I was told by a confidential source who participated in the same U.S.-NATO program, the long-time foreign minister and one-time prime minister of Montenegro, Igor Luksic, was a product of such a process. Luksic was chosen as a very young man to attend various conferences and retreats in Brussels and Washington and, after that, his political career really took off. All the while, he promoted the NATO agenda in Montenegro, even though this went against the will of the majority of the population.

“Another example is Ranko Krivokapic who was the speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament for over a decade. He traveled on official business to the U.S. a few times every year and boasted to others that he had a lot of friends in the State Department and other institutions of the U.S. government. There are examples like these in Serbia, Macedonia, Croatia, etc. All over the Balkans.”

There is also the fact the European Union has dovetailed its security arrangements to such an extent with NATO that new members are now virtually brought into the NATO structures by default. For example, Mahdi D. Nazemroaya, author of *The Globalization of NATO*, reports that the E.U.’s Security Strategy was absorbed into NATO during its annual summit in 2006. The emphasis of the summit was on securing energy resources with the goal of ‘co-managing the resources of the EU’s periphery from North Africa to the Caucuses.’ Also implied was the goal of redefining the E.U.’s security borders in synch with both Franco-German and Anglo-American economic and geopolitical interests.

Moreover, British Russia scholar Richard Sakwa, has pointed out that the security integration of the E.U. with NATO was further intensified with the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007:

“As for the comprehensive character, this is something that has been gaining in intensity in recent years as the foreign and security dimension of the E.U. has effectively merged with the Atlantic security community. The E.U.’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) since the Treaty of Lisbon (the “Reform Treaty”) of 13 December 2007, which came into effect in 2009, is now in substance part of an Atlantic system. Acceding countries are now required to align their defense and security policy with that of NATO, resulting in the effective ‘militarization’ of the E.U.”

At this point, the forces seeking a non-aligned bridge role for the Balkan states are still very much around, but have suffered marginalization due to lack of resources to take on the powerful and now entrenched pro-NATO political forces. However, with increasing discontent with the weak economic prospects in certain Balkan states, combined with increasing instability in the E.U., it is

believed that there is an opening for growth of the movement.

### **Economic Conditions in the Balkans**

The Balkan states comprise Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Greece.

In 2007, Romania and Bulgaria became E.U. members (three years after joining NATO). Romania's GDP has barely kept up with its 2008 rate and has a general unemployment rate of 6.4 percent, which sounds reasonable until you look at the youth unemployment rate of 21 percent, which doesn't bode well.

Bulgaria, on the other hand, is not part of the Eurozone and has not adopted the euro as its currency. Its economic prospects since joining the E.U. have not been impressive either. In the midst of the financial crisis of 2009, its GDP contracted by 5.5 percent, with a current unemployment rate of 7 percent and youth unemployment at 17 percent. Bulgaria is also recognized as one of the union's most corrupt countries.

Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Albania are all in the process of E.U. integration, with a supposed approval rate of 80-90 percent among the respective populations of these countries (except for Serbia), despite the virtual rape of Greece and the lackluster performance of Romania and Bulgaria.

It should be noted that all three Balkan nations that are actual E.U. members have higher emigration than immigration rates, another indication that accession to the E.U. doesn't necessarily translate into a prosperous future for the average person, particularly the young.

There is also the instability highlighted by the British people's vote to leave the E.U., spurred by disgust with austerity measures imposed by unaccountable bureaucrats in Brussels along with an influx of immigrants – one-third from these poorer E.U. nations – which adversely affect lower-wage natives.

Even if the E.U. had a better track record of effectiveness in terms of improving economic conditions for the masses, it would have a very tall order with some of the prospective Balkan states. Macedonia, for example, has an unemployment rate between 24 and 25 percent as of January 2016, although it has improved from the 2005 high of 37 percent. Despite this improvement, Macedonia still has one of the lowest GDPs in Europe and 72 percent of its citizens claimed they manage their household income only with "difficulty" or "great difficulty" in 2012.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is still feeling the effects of the war of 1992 to 1995 that

included major physical destruction of infrastructure and the bottoming out of its GDP. It currently suffers an unemployment rate of 42-43 percent.

Kosovo, a state that owes its existence to a NATO intervention, has 33 percent unemployment, a high crime rate and increasing political violence due to ethnic tensions and a growing ultra-nationalist movement. The Council of Europe compared the government of Kosovo to a mafia state in a 2010 report which revealed trafficking in human organs as well as drugs and weapons throughout Eastern Europe, even implicating the then-prime minister in the operation.

### **Russia's Opening**

Kovacevic states that the Atlanticist project of E.U. austerity economics and the enabling of Washington's destabilizing wars via NATO is starting to chip away at its popularity among Balkan populations. He also says Putin is prepared to take advantage of this opening and, since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, has turned his attention "to the Balkans with political force and funding not seen since the days of tsar Nicholas II."

This attention has manifested in the Lovcen Declaration, which was signed on May 6, by members of Russia's largest political party, United Russia, and the opposition Democratic People's Party in Montenegro in the village of Njegusi. Kovacevic explains:

"One of the most powerful political figures in Montenegro, the metropolitan Amfilohije, the chief bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, was present at the signing and gave his blessing. Though in the past Amfilohije has been known to support the authoritarian and pro-NATO prime minister Milo Djukanovi? around the election time, he has always publicly opposed NATO membership and has given fiery speeches on its 'evil nature' to the point of accusing NATO for continuing Hitler's anti-Slavic project.

"Even more importantly, Amfilohije's involvement with the Lovcen declaration reveals one of the fundamental components of Putin's overall geopolitical plan – the nurturing and intensification of the religious Christian Orthodox connection between the Russians and the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans. This includes not [only] the Serbs, Montenegrins and Macedonians, but also the Greeks and Bulgarians whose states are in NATO and whose religious 'awakening' can easily subvert NATO from the inside."

Criticism and minimization of the project have set the tone in Western media, to the extent that it has been covered at all, particularly in relation to utilizing an opposition party for significant influence. But Kovacevic argues that such a dismissive attitude is disingenuous:



"[T]he very same method has been used by the U.S. and NATO intelligence services to control the governments of East-Central European states since the collapse of communism. Countless small parties with just a handful of parliamentary deputies were formed with the money coming from the various 'black budgets' with the task of entering the governing coalition and then steering the entire government in the direction charted by their foreign founders and mentors.

"These parties have had minimal public legitimacy, but have made a great political impact with their 'blackmail' potential. As they also don't cost very much, the CIA, the MI6, and the BND regularly create them for every new election cycle.

"Now the Russians (primarily, the SVR and the GRU) are using the same rulebook for their own geopolitical interests. In addition, however, Putin's grand design for the Balkans embodied in the ANS is also likely to prove durable not only because it builds on the traditional cultural and religious ties linking Russia and the Balkans, but also because it rides on the wave of the enormous present popular dissatisfaction with the neoliberal Atlanticist political and economic status quo."

The fact that this declaration was signed in Montenegro is most relevant due to the fact that the country has been officially invited to join NATO, whose subsequent membership is treated in the West as a *fait accompli*. However, accession requires consensus approval by all current NATO members – one member could veto the move before completion of the process as happened with Macedonia when Greece vetoed their membership aspirations in 2008 when an invitation was to be offered at the Bucharest Summit – as well as approval by the population of Montenegro.

Joining any alliance treaty is arguably something that affects national sovereignty, which requires a referendum as Kovacevic, who is Montenegrin, explains:

*"The corrupt government of Milo Djukanovic is trying to avoid a national referendum because it knows that it does not have a majority support for NATO. If given a choice, the people of Montenegro would reject the protocol. The Constitution requires a referendum for all matters that affect national sovereignty, but Djukanovic is arguing falsely that NATO membership leaves Montenegrin sovereignty intact."*

Kovacevic predicts that a show-down over NATO membership could create instability in the country: *"[I]f he [Djukanovic] tries to push this decision through the Parliament (which he no doubt will), wide-scale strikes and demonstrations may take place all over the country. Whoever is pushing*

*Montenegro in NATO is dangerously destabilizing the country in mid-to-long term."*

If that happens, Washington may find for the first time in recent memory that forcing instability on a smaller country may ultimately accrue benefits to another great power, helping to facilitate a shift in geopolitics that it didn't bargain on. As Nazemroaya comments in his book:

"The [NATO] alliance is increasingly being viewed as a geopolitical extension of America, an arm of the Pentagon, and a synonym for an evolving American Empire. ... Ultimately, NATO is slated to become an institutionalized military force. ... Nevertheless, for every action there is a reaction and NATO's actions have given rise to opposing trends. The Atlantic Alliance is increasingly coming into contact with the zone of Eurasia that is in the process of emerging with its own ideas and alliance. What this will lead to next is the question of the century."

**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](http://natyliesbaldwin.com).**

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