

Why Putin's Latest Weapons Claims Should Scare Us

Exclusive: Americans should be very concerned about Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement on Russia's breakthroughs in weapons technology – not necessarily because they pose a threat, but because it will mean vast fortunes spent in the U.S. on an arms race, Jonathan Marshall argues.

By Jonathan Marshall

Be afraid. Be very afraid of Russian President Vladimir Putin's latest boast to his Federal Assembly that Russian scientists have come up with "a breakthrough in developing new models of strategic weapons" aimed at the United States.

Don't be afraid that he has any intention of using them. Don't even be afraid that most of the weapons he demonstrated through animated simulations are operational.

Be afraid, rather, that armchair Cold Warriors in the United States will shamelessly exploit Putin's speech to justify billions–no, trillions–of dollars in needless spending on a pointless nuclear arms race.

Achieving their agenda was made easier by media coverage of the speech, which reported that Putin "threatened the West" (New York Times) and "represented an escalated level of martial rhetoric even by his pugnacious standards" (Washington Post).

Putin in fact explicitly and repeatedly emphasized that his claimed new weapons are not offensive, but rather designed to maintain Russia's nuclear deterrent in the face of growing U.S. anti-missile systems.

Responding to the United States

"Back in 2000, the US announced its withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty," he explained. "We saw the Soviet-US ABM Treaty signed in 1972 as the cornerstone of the international security system... Together with the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, the ABM Treaty not only created an atmosphere of trust but also prevented either party from recklessly using nuclear weapons."

"We did our best to dissuade the Americans from withdrawing from the treaty," he continued. "All in vain. The US pulled out of the treaty in 2002. Even after that we tried to develop constructive dialogue with the Americans. ... All our proposals, absolutely all of them, were rejected."

Putin went on, “Despite our numerous protests and pleas ... there are new missile defense systems installed in Alaska and California; as a result of NATO’s expansion to the east, two new missile defense areas were created in Western Europe ... The US global missile defense system also includes five cruisers and 30 destroyers, which ... have been deployed to regions in close proximity to Russia’s borders.”

Putin overestimates the potential effectiveness of these U.S. missile defense systems, which have never proven reliable. But Russia’s generals, like ours, build their careers on exaggerating risks, and Putin, like most Russians, is easily awed by claims for U.S. technology.

As I wrote here in 2016, “The ABM system currently deployed in Europe is admittedly far too small today to threaten Russia’s nuclear deterrent. In fact, ABM technology is still unreliable, despite America’s investment of more than \$100 billion in R&D. Nonetheless, it’s a threat Russia cannot ignore. No U.S. military strategist would sit still for long if Russia began ringing the United States with such systems.”

Dubious Russian Claims

Russia didn’t sit still. In response, Putin said that Russia has developed new missiles capable of evading U.S. missile defenses—by taking new routes (e.g., over the South Pole), traveling underwater, operating at hypersonic speeds, or maneuvering unpredictably.

Some of his grandiose claims seem aimed less at convincing technical experts than at reassuring a domestic audience that Russia is still a great power and need not cower before superior American might.

For example, reports indicate that a nuclear-powered cruise missile, like one he described, crashed in recent tests, and experts say that the complex and expensive concept is inherently “insane.”

Similarly, if you just want to blow up some U.S. ports, it makes no sense to build a new class of nuclear drones capable of traveling thousands of miles underwater, when you could just deploy off-the-shelf nuclear missiles with cheap decoy warheads to foil U.S. defenses.

In an interview with Megyn Kelly on NBC, Putin himself admitted that only one of the weapons he referenced—a large but fairly traditional missile—was combat ready.

“We are not threatening anyone”

For all his boasting, Putin was simply making a point that most arms experts, and even the Pentagon, have long conceded: Russia has the means to defeat U.S. missile defenses, not to prevail in a war.

“We are not threatening anyone, not going to attack anyone or take away anything from anyone with the threat of weapons,” he said.

In case anyone still misjudged his intent, he added, “There is no need to create more threats to the world. Instead, let us sit down at the negotiating table and devise together a new and relevant system of international security and sustainable development for human civilization.”

Most of these caveats, of course went unquoted in Western news accounts. Instead, traditionally hostile reporters like Neil MacFarquhar and David Sanger of the New York Times said Putin had “essentially” declared that Russia “had made America’s response obsolete”—slippery language suggesting that U.S. security might be at risk.

In fact, nothing in Putin’s statement even hinted that the U.S. nuclear deterrent, backed up by 4,000 city-busting warheads, was in question.

It takes a lot less than that to deter a nuclear attack. China has just a few hundred warheads, but no one would ever think of messing with it. Indeed, no rational leader—a category that may or may not include President Trump—would even think of launching a nuclear attack on North Korea, with its few dozen primitive warheads.

The assessment of Lt. General James Kowalski, Vice Commander of the U.S. Strategic Command, remains true today as it was in 2013: a Russian nuclear attack on the United States is such “a remote possibility” that it is “hardly worth discussing.”

The Militarists Respond

But America’s neo-Cold Warriors instantly seized on Putin’s speech to whip up anti-Russia frenzy and call for even more military spending.

President Obama’s former ambassador to Moscow, Michael McFaul, insisted that President Trump was derelict for not responding forcefully to “Putin’s speech today threatening to attack America in new ways with nuclear weapons.” The lack of push back, he said, was “Amazing. Disappointing. And scary.”

More amazing, disappointing, and scary was the former ambassador’s utter mischaracterization of Putin’s speech. One hopes that his reporting to the State Department was not so casually in error.

And then there was the oft-quoted Adm. James Stavridis, former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, who asserted that Putin's speech "illuminates his 'go big' strategy for dealing with the U.S., including an aggressive stance backed up by destabilizing weapons."

"It should spur us to develop counters to what he is describing," he declared. "We need to do the research and development, testing, fielding and training to deal with the new battlefield he is describing, with both offensive and defensive capabilities."

Such language reinforces the Pentagon's ambitious agenda, outlined in its recent "Nuclear Posture Review," which calls for creating at least two new kinds of nuclear weapons while pursuing a \$1.7 trillion program of "modernizing" America's nuclear arsenal.

Even more extreme, Rob Dannenberg, former chief of the CIA's Central Eurasia Division, concluded that "Putin may have stolen a march on us as we have underinvested in strategic weapons for at least the past decade."

"We need to recognize Putin is the arch enemy of the West," Dannenberg stated. "We need to recognize there is no negotiating with him. . . Russia's behavior will not change until the regime is changed. That should be our focus and strategy."

If anything should keep us up at night worrying about the fate of the world, it's nuts like Dannenberg, calling for regime change in Russia—not Putin's cartoon videos about how Russia plans to maintain a stable nuclear deterrent with the United States.

Jonathan Marshall is the author of many articles on nuclear arms and policy, including "Learning to Love – and Use – the Bomb," "Dreams of 'Winning' Nuclear War on Russia," "Obama's Unkept Promise on Nuclear War," "Endangering a Landmark Nuclear Treaty."

All Fire and Fury in Ukraine

Exclusive: The still decidedly volatile situation in Ukraine – resulting from another in a long line of U.S.-inspired regime changes that have destabilized the geopolitical landscape over the past few decades – is worth revisiting for a number of reasons. With the fourth anniversary of the coup just passed, the sudden, shock passing of veteran investigative journalist Robert Parry and Consortium News founder/editor also affords even greater impetus for doing so.

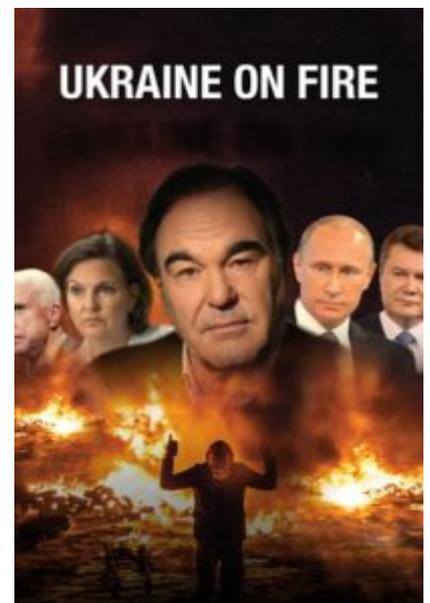
This is especially given his incisive body of reportage on the crisis since 2014; the larger issue of America's worsening relationship with Russia; and the geopolitical implications going forward of these developments. Australian blogger Greg Maybury reports.

By Greg Maybury

A Shabby Deck of Political Cards

For those who haven't seen Ukraine on Fire (UOF), the Oliver Stone-produced documentary on the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, it is not overstating the case to say it's an essential historical document and one of the most important, insightful political documentaries of recent times. It may also be one of the most portentous.

Quite apart from the illuminating history lesson the film delivers as a backdrop to the current situation in one of Europe's most pivotal of battlegrounds, there are many takeaways from the film. To begin, it stands as a vital corrective of the disinformation, misinformation, evangelistic doublespeak, ersatz analysis, unadulterated agitprop, and plain old garden-variety groupthink that attended the public discourse on the events and developments in the country, and which ultimately framed most people's views of the situation. Needless to say, the messages and impressions conveyed by this ongoing, relentless 'psy-op' cum fake news onslaught still 'rules the roost' in most people's minds.



Further, the film's narrative is highly revealing in the manner in which the Western mainstream media (MSM) reported on the events surrounding the turmoil and conflict. In the process it showcases how much the perfidious thought contagion spread by the ever- nefarious neoconservatives and their fellow travelers the liberal interventionists infects U.S. foreign policy, along with the foreign policies of America's assorted vassal states.

It underscores moreover Russia's seemingly inexhaustible forbearance with the U.S., which, sans any rational, coherent geopolitical basis for doing so, has been tested beyond reasonable endurance or expectation. This point is rendered especially palpable during the interviews Stone conducts with Russian president Vladimir Putin for UOF. (This is not to mention the actual The Putin Interviews).

At the same time UOF reveals again for those looking America's recidivistic predisposition for interfering in the affairs of other countries; this is an observation that's always been evident save for the most preternaturally ignorant, ideologically myopic, or imperially inclined. Given the present zeitgeist as reflected by the headline-hogging "soap-saga" of "Russia-gate" – buttressed by former CIA chief James Woolsey's whimsically smug concession recently that America interferes in other countries' affairs "only for a very good cause [and] in the interests of democracy" – this is a reality that cannot be overstated. This is especially so when there are all too few examples where anyone might point to America's interference actually serving the democratic interests (by any way *that* might be objectively measured) of any given country one might care to name.

The narrative encompassed by UOF is by extension a serious indictment on President Barack Obama's handling of the Ukraine situation and his role in the creation of this singularly unholy mess – a prime exemplar of just how chaotic, dysfunctional, indeed war-like, were in large part the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize winner's foreign policies. Ukraine on Fire attests unequivocally just how far removed the reality of Obama's tenure was from his campaign rhetoric.

More broadly, the disaster in Ukraine – as we'll see still a work in progress even now under his successor, someone who pledged to curtail this direction in U.S. policy making, a promise which in no small measure propelled him into the Oval Office – is one of many that will forever inform people's views of Number 44's shop-soiled legacy. As Eric Zuesse noted a year after the coup, Obama employed a tactic of,

"...attacking Russia by using fundamentalist and other conservative extremists in a given Russia-allied nation, so as to turn that...nation away from Russia, and toward America, and then of trying to crush these same right-wing extremists who've been so effective in defeating (or at least weakening) the pro-Russian leader in that Russia-allied country. This tactic leaves civil war and enormous bloodshed in the given formerly (or still) Russia-allied nation."

Three years after Zuesse made this comment, and over one year after Obama left office, that situation to all intents prevails, with few harboring any optimism things are going to get better anytime soon. In fact ominously, quite the opposite scenario is unfolding.

Earlier this year, Gilbert Doctorow reported that a new draft law adopted by the Ukrainian Parliament and awaiting president Petro Poroshenko's signature, threatens to escalate the Ukrainian conflict into a full-blown war, pitting nuclear-armed Russia against the United States and NATO. "Due to dire economic conditions," Doctorow says, "Poroshenko and other government officials in Kiev

have become deeply unpopular, and with diminished chances for electoral success may see war as politically advantageous.”

As history indelibly reminds us, this is an all too frequently recurring scenario in the conduct of international affairs. In a statement that undercuts much of the furor over the Russia-gate imbroglio, Doctorow observes that in contrast to the image of Trump administration policies being dictated by Moscow as portrayed by proponents of Russia-gate conspiracy theories, “the United States is moving towards deeper confrontation with the Kremlin in the geopolitical hotspot of Ukraine. For its part, the Kremlin has very little to gain and a great deal to lose economically and diplomatically from a campaign now against Kiev. If successful, as likely would be the case *given the vast disparity in military potential* of the two sides, it could easily become a Pyrrhic victory.” [My emphasis]

Just as ominous is the following. As noted in an Oriental Review op-ed earlier this year, a new neo-Nazi revival is clearly in the offing. This is in a country where fascist/Nazi/extreme right sentiment, especially in the western regions, has a long, storied, and ugly history, one that rarely bubbles far from the surface.

Again, this “ugly history” was laid bare in Ukraine on Fire. After concluding that the current situation in Ukraine is ‘painfully reminiscent’ of Germany in the 1920s, the OR op-ed attributes,

“... poor governance on the heels of a lost war, which – added to the sense of betrayed hopes and the sharp decline in average incomes coupled with rising prices – is all driving a critical mass of the Ukrainian population toward *an overwhelming feeling of desperation.*” [My emphasis]

In an observation attended by a profound sense of déjà vu for even casual students of history, the op-ed goes on to say that “[A] demand from the public for a ‘strong hand’ – a new, authoritarian ruler – is rapidly coalescing, due to their dissatisfaction with President Poroshenko and all the other jokers they’ve been dealt from that shabby deck of political cards.” According to the op-ed, a man like that already exists in this ‘destitute and disintegrating’ country. Known as the “White Führer” to his comrades-in-arms, this man is Andriy Biletsky, the commander of the Azov Battalion who is making an ever-bigger name for himself in the Ukrainian parliament and across the broader political arena.

Open Season on Russia

Of course all this only serves to highlight the pressures being brought to bear within the country itself; it is also those from without (not entirely unrelated

to be sure) that are – or should be – of equal concern. Herein Doctorow again provides an alarming reveal. Although there are indications Washington is ‘fed up’ with the Kiev regime (and as Ukraine on Fire demonstrates conclusively, one it was responsible for installing in the first instance in 2014), he says,

“...the United States has doubled down in its support for a military solution to the conflict. With military trainers now on the ground (*does this development itself not have an ominously familiar ring to it?*), and the U.S. budgeting \$350m for security assistance to Ukraine, Washington has also recently started delivering lethal weapons, including the Javelin anti-tank missile system, free of charge to Kiev.’ [My emphasis].

In a Strategic Culture report, Robert Bridge recently offered an additional reality check on those external pressures. Instead of opting for a more balanced and cooperative foreign policy in its conduct of affairs in Eastern Europe, and specifically in its bilateral relationship with Russia, in his view, it was via the furphy of “Russia[n] aggression” – an allegation he says was “peddled to the unsuspecting masses based on *fake news of a Russian ‘invasion’ of Ukraine and Crimea*” – [that] the U.S. and NATO “dropped all pretensions [to cooperation] and declared open season on Russia.” [My emphasis]

This was, he notes, further compounded by assertions Russia manipulated the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election and along with Donald Trump’s “empty threat” to pull the pin on NATO if member states did not pony up on additional defense spending, “Eastern Europe has [now] become a veritable hothouse of paranoia-driven militarization.”

We’ll return to this point later, but some backstory is essential here. Whether one has already seen Ukraine on Fire or not, it now comes complete with a hitherto unexpected layer of revelation and significance, given that the late Consortium News founder and editor Robert Parry is interviewed at length therein. Parry’s appearance in the film, poignantly as it turns out, underscores the man’s trailblazing achievements and his unimpeachable stature within the alternative, independent media cosmos.

For those folks constantly on the lookout for exemplars of journalism’s fundamental values, his input into the film’s narrative is a reminder to us all just how much his political insight and measured analysis will be missed. It goes without saying that those values have themselves been missing in action for some time in our mainstream media, as Parry himself – to his eternal chagrin – was all too aware. This is a state of affairs to which he spent the last two decades of his life exposing via the Consortium News masthead. So much so it seems, there was even some hint (by the man himself as it turns out) that the stress and pressure of being a media outlier had taken its toll and may have

been the catalyst for the strokes he had in the weeks before his untimely death.

Yet Parry's voluminous, in-depth commentary on Ukraine – including his many pieces on the controversy surrounding the still unresolved mystery of the downing of Malaysian Airlines MH-17 in eastern Ukraine in June 2014 (with 38 of my fellow Aussies on board) – was arguably second to none. His fierce, fearless criticism of those engaging in the aforementioned 'groupthink' – not just those in and around the Beltway but in the West in general (with as we'll see my own country being a noteworthy example) – was insightful, along with his own reporting on events and developments as they unfolded over the months and years that followed 2014's color revolution which culminated in the coup d'état.

Many of Parry's observations in the film are reflective of, and derived from, that commentary, as those who followed his reporting closely on the Ukraine situation over the years will appreciate. He was acutely aware that one could not have a discussion of the key geopolitical events and developments of our time without some serious examination of the manner in which the corporate media manages (read: "massages") the narratives that frame the Big Issues therein.

As noted, in this Parry was unremitting in his disdain for those of his fellow "investigative journalists" who had sold their souls for the filthy lucre, the celebrity status, and/or the comfortable, secure tenure at one of the "premium" corporate media marques. To him, at best, they were perception managers; at worst glorified stenographers. (For others perhaps less tactful or more scornful than Parry, they were/are simply "presstitutes"!)

Yet for all that disdain, Parry possibly reserved even greater contempt for the "marques" that employed the "presstitutes", with the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* being singled out for frequently justified, laser-like reproach. To be sure, that was just with the print media. In this the reporting on the Ukraine crisis provides an exemplar – albeit by no means the only one – of just how self-serving, venal, hypocritical, supercilious, irresponsible, and manifestly dishonest the corporate media were.

And of course they still are, each day sliding further and further into irrelevance as they blithely betray both the hallowed U.S. Constitution and the citizens of the country whose individual and collective interests they are increasingly at pains to validly claim to represent, and whose democratic institutions – along with the rights that are purportedly underwritten by said "institutions" – they are supposed to protect.

'Shirt-fronting' the Mainstream Fakery

Such a damning indictment of Western media was brought home in spades in the

aftermath of the MH-17 disaster. It was a 60 Minutes Australia report on the tragedy that really got his gander up, and in this writer's view, rightly so. At the time I was preparing my own take on MH-17, when the 60 Minutes segment aired.

I immediately alerted Bob to the report, knowing full well that given his earlier commentary on the tragedy and his views on MSM reporting in general, he'd be less than impressed with the conclusions they arrived at from their "investigation." Much of this commentary by 60 Minutes was based on the dubious findings of Bellingcat (aka Eliot Higgins), a self-styled open source 'citizen journalist' who claimed to have the 'skinny' on who was responsible for the disaster.

Now space prohibits herein a full account of the circumstances surrounding the shoot-down, nor does it lend itself to a 'blow by blow' of the 'argy-bargy' between the 60 Minutes crew and their much touted source Higgins, and Parry himself. Suffice to say there seemed to be few limits to the indignation the former all managed to muster when the intrepid Consortium Newsman had the temerity to meticulously and relentlessly challenge their account of the tragedy.

(Those unfamiliar with this dust-up – one that perfectly case studies the vast gulf that exists between MSM reportage on MH-17 and that of a respected alternative news outlet – can see here, here, here, here, here, here, here, here, and here for some of the commentary the 'stoush' incited and examples of the tit-for-tat exchanges between the respective antagonists.)

It needs be noted that there was much political capital to be gained by those in Washington and most of America's allies in the West by blaming Russia for the MH-17 tragedy. The U.S. and said allies had already blamed the crisis in Ukraine that derived from the February 2014 coup on Russian "aggression" and Putin's purported ambitions to resurrect the Soviet Union. So in one sense it was to be expected they'd seek to capitalize on this disaster by blaming the Russians.

Western leaders to this end began tripping over themselves in singling out 'Vlad the Derailer' as the bad guy du jour, all the while doing so unencumbered by anything approximating solid evidence to support this stance. As we might expect with the Russia-gate saga, to this day, no definitive proof of the hard-core forensic kind has been presented to identify exactly how the plane was shot down (was the missile launched from the air or from the ground?), much less who actually perpetrated the act (was it the anti-Russian Ukrainian military, the pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine, or the Russians themselves?) Again, to this day, the questions as to whether the plane was deliberately targeted (was it a false-flag attack?, or did it just happen to be in the wrong place at the

wrong time), also remain unanswered.

As noted, the downing of MH-17 cost the lives of 38 Aussies, and the fallout from the tragedy – to say nothing of the way the disaster was politicized in order to serve the broader geopolitical objectives of the Beltway Bedlamites and their apparatchiks at home along with their counterparts in other Western nations – was especially pronounced Down Under. Our then Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who took to sculling the Washington Kool-Aid by asserting it was Putin himself who was “personally responsible” for the disaster, was especially bolshie in his reaction.

Ahead of Putin’s visit to this country in November 2014 for the G20 meeting in Brisbane that year, Abbott threatened to “shirt-front” the Russian president over the issue when they officially met up. Whilst this made for great headlines here and abroad, it did nothing to arrest his slide in the opinion polls, which one can reasonably surmise was at the time in the back of his mind. All in all, coming from a national leader on the world stage, this unprecedented, petulant outburst was something to behold.

But such was the fervor of the times regarding MH-17, and more broadly, the anti-Russian sentiment that prevailed earlier in the year over Russia’s “invasion” of Ukraine in the aftermath of America’s bespoke coup d’état. Clearly Abbott’s desire to leverage the public outrage here in Australia that accompanied the tragedy and to ingratiate himself with the Bedlamites far outweighed any obligation that might’ve routinely accompanied a more measured diplomatic response. (It was after all to no avail; Abbott’s hold on the Aussie “premiership” was itself ‘shirt-fronted’ about a year after making this comment, being successfully challenged for the leadership by the present PM Malcolm Turnbull.)

It should further be noted that many folks – mostly after the fact – justified the removal of the then Ukrainian government because it was irredeemably corrupt. This of course is a specious and convenient argument – a ‘justification’ that makes frequent cameos in the annals of regime change – partly so in this case because there’s little evidence the replacement regime has been any less corrupt.

But this raises an altogether different, arguably more important consideration: If Uncle Sam had removed every last one of the countless client tyrants he’s had on his imperial dance card over the decades on the sole basis of their ethical, moral and/or legal standards of governance, adherence to democratic principles, and/or general political probity, it’s fair to surmise the geopolitical terrain might look as different today as the lunar landscape does to an as yet still pristine portion of the Amazonian rainforest. And the U.S. might still retain –

and be able to credibly lay claim to – some of the moral capital it had accrued by war's end in 1945, which few would argue it has now all but frittered away.

Of course if we really want to push the envelope herein invoking moral relativism, we only need consider that – notwithstanding what it says on the box – America itself is hardly a bastion of “ethical, moral and/or legal standards of governance, [adherence to] democratic principles, and/or general political propriety.” Its ‘unblemished’ track record of thuggery and skullduggery implementing regime change on every continent except the Great White Patch on the “backside” of the Big Blue Ball is ample evidence of that. This is without even referencing its performance closer to home drawing on such benchmarks! It's a “practice what you preach” thing!

Further, there was and remains no smoking gun evidence linking Russia or the Eastern Ukrainian, pro-Russian separatists to the MH-17 shoot-down, and therefore no sound rationale for Washington accusing either of complicity in this crime without ponying up with said evidence. If anything, the longer the dog-not-barking question of why the U.S. refused to release all of the forensic evidence and ‘intel’ related to the shoot-down remains unanswered, the more we should rightfully suspect any findings by the MH-17 investigation team (if they ever see the light of day) – one it has to be emphasized, suspiciously included representatives from the at least equally suspect Kiev regime.

Moreover, for the U.S. to have imposed a further regimen of economic sanctions as a consequence without at least awaiting the outcome of the official investigation spoke further volumes about Washington's deeper game-plan vis-à-vis Ukraine and ultimately, Russia itself. And it would appear we are now seeing that “game-plan” come to a fruition of sorts. Again, to underscore all of this, in one of Parry's last substantive analyses of the Ukraine situation back in June last year, he summed a decidedly more coherent reality for us all.

“As the New York Times instructed us’ he observed in 2015, ‘there was no coup in Ukraine...no U.S. interference...and there weren't even that many neo-Nazis. And the ensuing conflict wasn't a resistance [movement] among Yanukovych's supporters to his illegal ouster; no, it was ‘Russian aggression’ or a ‘Russian invasion.’” Parry didn't spare the horses:

“If you deviate from this groupthink – if you point out how U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland talked about the U.S. spending \$5 billion on Ukraine; mention her pre-coup intercepted phone call with [Ukrainian] U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt discussing who the new leaders would be and how ‘to glue’ or [how to] ‘midwife this thing’; note how Nuland and Senator John McCain urged on the violent anti-Yanukovych protesters; recognize that snipers firing from far-right-controlled buildings killed both police *and* protesters to provoke

the climactic ouster of Yanukovich; [and if] you think all that indeed looks like a coup – you obviously are the victim of ‘Russian propaganda and disinformation.’”

But as Parry glumly observed, thanks to the mainstream U.S. media, most Americans didn’t get to hear about any of that as, “[I]t has essentially banned those deviant facts from the public discourse. If they are mentioned at all, they’re lumped together with ‘fake news’ amid the reassuring hope that soon there’ll be algorithms to purge such troublesome information from the Internet.”

And for anyone whose “blowback antennae” are attuned to such matters, we cannot escape one abiding reality regarding the MH-17 disaster: If the putsch-meisters of the Potomac had minded their own business from the off and left well enough alone in Ukraine, *irrespective of the cause of the shoot-down and who was responsible*, we do know around three hundred innocent people would still be going about their business, and we wouldn’t be having this ‘conversation’. Four years later this is a reality I’ve yet to hear voiced by anyone in the MSM or in the upper echelons of Western governments. [My emphasis].

From Nobel Peace Prize to Imperial Warmonger

Last but not least, consider the following. For this writer, it remains incomprehensible that a U.S. State Department official – in this case the aforementioned Ms Nuland (aka The Maidan Cookie Monster) – would seemingly act in such a brazenly undiplomatic manner in bringing about this coup, a reality that as we’ve seen independent media folks like Robert Parry were at pains to bring to wider attention. It is in this instance particularly that the “he who lies first, lies best” maxim really comes to the fore.

Yet there can be no doubt that Nuland initiated this action with Obama’s full knowledge, with it being as much, if not more so, Obama’s mess as it is Nuland’s and her neocon cronies. Well might we say, “cue Harry Truman’s “the buck stops here!”

Of equal or greater concern herein is this. I’m sure I’m not the only one who noted with considerable bewilderment and dismay, the Kiev regime’s deployment – again with the full knowledge, approval indeed encouragement of the regime renovators in Washington – of extreme neo-Nazi forces in facilitating its rise to power from the off, and enforcing since the coup its brutal, illegitimate rule. As noted earlier, they are again getting their second wind.

Given the neoconservatives well-documented vise-grip on U.S. foreign policy in general, and their role in engineering said coup in particular – especially that of the Nuland/Kagan/ex-PNAC factions and their fellow travelers in the U.S.

Congress such as McCain, who number amongst them some of the most prominent, so-called “American friends of Israel” – I’m at something of a loss as to how best to explain the glaring disconnect herein.

Of course America’s foreign policy “initiatives” over the decades have always embraced an “end justifies the means” precept; only the most naïve or ill-informed would deny this. But for most objective observers – even those of us all too familiar with the CIA’s notorious Operation Paperclip, or its equally infamous Operation Gladio, wherein the U.S. actively recruited under-the-radar not-so-rehabbed former Nazis and extreme right wing elements to fight on any number of fronts the Cold War against the Soviets – this is breaking new ground in its embrace of the precept. Prima facie, this has to represent another glaring WTF ‘mo’ in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Geopolitics makes strange bedfellows, one might reasonably conclude! *And* transforms Nobel Peace Prize winners into imperial warmongers!

Or is it possible I’m just missing something obvious here? How are all these “American friends of Israel,” either inside or outside of the Capitol ‘tent’, able to reconcile their on-going support of a regime utilizing such forces – whose pernicious ideology being synonymous with rabid anti-Semitism would one imagines be totally abhorrent to Jewish folks and non-Jews alike – under any circumstances?

As it turns out, the so-called “friends” have been bending butt over backwards since the coup denying, playing down, or completely ignoring this “disconnect”. It is only begrudgingly and belatedly they – along with their hacks, flacks and lackeys in the MSM – were able to bring themselves to concede there has been and remains any such neo-Nazi involvement in Ukraine, much less acknowledge any such “disconnect”.

Another key question here is this. How does the all powerful AIPAC and various Jewish/Israel lobby groups and affiliated bodies feel about their “American friends” precipitating and engaging in regime change missions that involve the use and on-going embrace of neo-Nazi forces? Is this just some fuzzy ‘post-modern’ perversion of realpolitik at work here, and I’m simply too naive to understand what the hell is going on and what the end-game might be? And now that the neo-Nazi ‘natives’ are becoming increasingly restless as noted – their frustration with their nominal patrons within the present regime’s hierarchy reaching boiling points – it’ll doubtless make for interesting times ahead.

All this of course without considering the added reality of these extreme right-wing factions possibly combining forces and cozying up in a Nazi/fascist/white supremacist group hug cum love-fest with radical jihadist/Islamic militant groups in what could likely shape up to be an exceedingly bloody counter-coup,

along with the equally likely prospects of the Ukrainian economy imploding in the interim, or at least in the wake of the turmoil induced by any such coup!

On these matters alone, I'm prepped nonetheless to be enlightened as to how/when anything good is likely to come out of America's color revolution and regime renovation experiment in this part of the geopolitical landscape. And when it comes to the situation in Ukraine, one that has emanated directly from America's interference in its political affairs in 2014, well might we ask of the aforementioned, former CIA chief spook Woolsey: How's that '[we] only [do it] for a very good cause [and] in the interests of democracy' thing workin' out for ya Jimbo?'

Yet whilst these are just some of the reality checks needed in order to assemble a measure of veracity and insight regarding all things Ukraine, such "checks" one imagines are, and will remain for sometime, asynchronous with the narratives disseminated via Washington's anti-Putin, anti-Russian "brochure."

And one final point if I may. If Putin and his Kremlin gremlins did indeed do some kind of a dodgy deal with Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election in order to get him across the line ahead of Hillary Clinton – the only story that seems to capture the attention of the MSM mavens these days – it would be fair to say that the otherwise estimable Russian president and his beloved Motherland are getting well and truly shafted. Maybe Putin isn't as clever as we give him credit for? To be so artfully duped by a dope like The Trumpster? Oh, the ignominy of it all!

Yet, all that aside, wouldn't many of us just love to hear what the estimable and dutifully righteous Mr Parry might've had to say about more recent and possible developments in the country that interestingly – according to [Dutch historian Kees Boterbloem](#) – was affectionately known back in the day as "Little Russia"?

But of course that's not going to happen. I can only hope this missive in some small – if not (ahem) *short* – measure, passes for the next best thing!

Missile-gate: U.S. Intel Misses Russia's Big Advances in Nuclear Parity

Russian President Vladimir Putin's announcement on Thursday of major technological advances in nuclear weapons delivery systems appears to have caught the U.S. intelligence community unawares, reports Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

President Vladimir Putin's two-hour long address yesterday to the Federal Assembly, a joint session of both houses of Russia's bicameral legislature – plus large numbers of Russia's cultural, business and other elites – constituted his platform for the upcoming presidential election on March 18. This, in lieu of participation in the televised debates on all federal television channels in which other seven candidates are busy these days.

But as is the case with many of Vladimir Putin's major presentations, the speech yesterday was addressed to a far broader audience than the Russian electorate. Many of the estimated 700 journalists invited to attend were foreign correspondents. Indeed, one might reasonably argue that the speech was directed abroad, precisely to the United States.

The final third of the address, devoted to defense and presenting for the first time several major new and technically unparalleled offensive nuclear weapons systems, established Russia's claim to full nuclear parity with the United States, overturning the country's withdrawal from superpower status dating from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992. Some Russian commentators, in a burst of national pride, claimed that the power of the Soviet Union had now been restored and the wrongs of the 1990s were finally undone.

In its own way, this speech was as important, perhaps more important than Putin's talk to the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 at which he set out in length Russia's grievances with U.S. global hegemony installed in the 1990s and the utter disregard for or denial of Russia's national interests. That speech was a turning point in U.S.-Russian relations which headed us to the deep confrontation of today. Yesterday's speech suggested not the onset of a new arms race, but its conclusion, with outright Russian victory and U.S. defeat.

Putin's address was a "shock and awe" event. I leave to others, more competent than I in military technology to comment on the specific capabilities of the various systems rolled out yesterday. Whether short range or unlimited range, whether ground launched or air launched, whether ballistic missiles or cruise missiles, whether flying through the atmosphere or navigating silently and at high speed the very depths of the oceans, these various systems are said to be invincible to any known or prospective air defense such as the United States has invested in heavily since it unilaterally left the ABM Treaty and set out on a course that would upend strategic parity.

Since 2002, U.S. policy has aimed at enabling a first strike knocking out Russian ICBMs and then rendering useless Russia's residual nuclear forces which could be shot out of the air. Russia's new highly maneuverable and ultra-high

speed (Mach 10 and Mach 20) missiles and underwater nuclear drone render illusory any scenario based on non-devastating response to the US homeland following a US strike on Russia. In passing, the new systems also render useless and turn into sitting duck targets the entire US navy, with its aircraft carrier formations.

U.S. and Western media response to Putin's address was varied. The *Financial Times* tried its best at neutral reporting, and midway through its feature article gave a paragraph each to two of Russia's most authoritative politicians with special expertise in relations with the West: Konstantin Kosachev and Alexei Pushkov, both former chairmen of the Duma's Committee on Foreign Affairs.

However, their reporters and editorial supervisors were out of their depth, unable to reach a consistent view on what the Kremlin is doing. On the one hand Putin's statements about Russia's "unstoppable" nuclear weapons are reduced to "claims," suggesting a certain skepticism; on the other hand, the consequence is to "fuel concern about a new arms race with the U.S." They cannot fathom that the race is over.

The *Washington Post* was fairly quick to post a lengthy article in its online edition yesterday. An unusually large part consisted of quotes from Putin's speech. The editorial line tells it all in the title assigned: "Putin claims Russia is developing nuclear arms capable of avoiding missile defenses." I would put the accent on "claims" and "is developing." The reporter and newspaper management seem not to have gotten the point: that one of these systems is already deployed in the Russia's Southern Military District and that others are going into serial production. These systems are not a wish list, they are hard facts.

The *New York Times* was characteristically slow in posting articles on a development which caught its staff and management totally unprepared. In the space of a couple of hours, it put up two articles in succession dealing with the defense section of Vladimir Putin's address. In both, but more particularly in the article co-authored by reporters Neil MacFarquhar and David E. Sanger, the stress is on "bluff."

It is blithely assumed that Putin was just delivering a campaign speech to rouse "the patriotic passions of Russians" and so consolidate his forthcoming electoral victory. The writers take solace in the notion that "deception lies at the heart of current Russian military doctrine," so that "questions arose about whether these weapons existed."

These speculations, especially in the *New York Times* tell us one thing: that our media willfully ignore the plain facts about Vladimir Putin. First, that he has

always done what he has said. Second, that he is by nature very cautious and methodical. The word “carefully” (?????????) is a constant element in his speech vocabulary. In this context, the notion of “bluff” in a matter that would put Russian national security at risk and possibly cost tens of millions of Russian lives if the bluff were called – such a notion is utter nonsense.

I would like to believe that the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington will not be so giddy or superficial in judging what they heard yesterday from Mr. Putin. If that is so, they will be urgently recommending to their President to enter into very broad negotiations with the Russians over arms control. And they will be going back to their staffs to completely revise their recommendations with respect to the military hardware and installations which the United States is financing in 2019 and beyond. Our present budget, including the trillion or so being appropriated for upgrading nuclear warheads and producing more low-yield weapons is a waste of taxpayer money.

However, still more importantly, the implications of Vladimir Putin’s address yesterday are that U.S. intelligence has been asleep at the wheel for the past 14 years if not longer. It is a national scandal for the country to lose an arms race it was not even aware was occurring. Heads should roll, and the process should begin with proper hearings on Capitol Hill. For reasons that will be clear from what follows, among the first witnesses called upon to testify should be former Vice President Dick Cheney and former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

In the past such a revelation of a vast security gap with the country’s main geopolitical and military competitor would lead to political recriminations and finger pointing. What came up yesterday is far bigger than the “missile gap” of the late 1950s that brought Jack Kennedy to the White House in a campaign to restore vigor to American political culture and wake it from the somnolent Eisenhower years with their complacency about security matters and much else.

Moreover, the roll-out yesterday of new Russian weaponry that changes the world power balance was just one in a chain of remarkable Russian achievements over the past four years that caught US leadership entirely by surprise. The explanation has till now been the alleged unpredictability of Vladimir Putin, even if absolutely nothing he did could not have been foreseen by someone paying close attention.

One prime example was the Russian capture of Crimea in February-March 2014 without a shot being fired or a single fatality in circumstances where the 20,000 Russian troops based in their leased Sevastopol enclave confronted 20,000 Ukrainian forces on the peninsula. Western media spoke of a Russian “invasion” which amounted to nothing more than the Russian troops leaving their barracks.

The Russians had used nothing more exotic than psychological warfare, old-fashioned “psy-ops” as it is called in the States executed to perfection by pros, all dating from the time of Von Clausewitz.

Then the Pentagon was caught with its pants down in September 2015 when Putin at the United Nations General Assembly announced the dispatch of Russian warplanes to Syria for a campaign against ISIS and to support Assad that would begin the next day. Why did we suspect nothing? Was it because Russia was known to be too poor to execute such a challenging mission abroad to precise objectives and timelines?

In the same war theater, the Russians again “surprised” Americans by setting up a joint military intelligence center in Baghdad with Iraq and Iran. And it further “surprised” NATO by flying bombing missions to the Syrian theater over Iran and Iraqi airspace after being denied flight rights in the Balkans. With thousands of military and diplomatic staff based in Iraq, how is it that the United States knew nothing about the Russian agreements with Iraqi leadership in advance?

My point is that the confusion over how to interpret Putin’s announcement of Russia’s new defense capability is a systemic failure of U.S. intelligence. The next obvious question is why? Where is the CIA? Where are the intel bosses when they are not investigating Trump?

The answer is not to be found in just one or two elements, for sure. Nor is it a failure that developed recently. There is a good measure of blinding complacency about Russia as a “failed state” that has cut across the whole US political establishment since the 1990s when the Russia was flat on its back. One simply could not imagine the Kremlin rising to the challenge of its missions in Crimea, in Syria, in development of the world’s most sophisticated high-tech armaments.

And it is not only blindness to things Russian. It is a fundamental failure to grasp that state power anywhere is not dependent only on GDP and demographic trends but also on grit, patriotic determination and the intelligence of thousands of researchers, engineers and production personnel.

This conceptual poverty infects some of our most brilliant Realpolitik political scientists in the academic community who in principle should be open to understanding the world as it is, not the world as we wish it to be. Somehow we seem to have forgotten the lesson of David and Goliath. Somehow we have forgotten the Israeli numbers of 4 or 5 million standing up militarily to 100 million Arabs. It was unimaginable to us that Russia would be the David to our Goliath.

But there are more objective reasons for the utter failure of US intelligence to grasp the scale and seriousness of the Russian challenge to US global hegemony. Specifically, we must consider the gutting of our Russian intelligence capabilities in the days, months, years following 9/11.

There are those who will say, with reason, that the decline of US intelligence capabilities on Russia began already in the second administration of Ronald Reagan, when the Cold War came to an end and the expertise of Cold Warriors seemed no longer relevant. Surely numbers of Russia experts were allowed to decline by attrition.

And yet, when 9/11 struck, many of those in higher positions in the CIA had come to the Agency as Russia experts. It was the CIA's lack of skills in the languages and area knowledge of the Middle East that was glaring in the aftermath of the Al-Qaeda attack on the Twin Towers that guided the reshaping of priorities for intelligence. Clearly this deficiency and the necessary re-profiling of expertise could not augur well for the continued employment of holdovers from the Soviet desk.

But a still greater factor in the sharp decline in Russian expertise within US intelligence agencies was the shift from dependence on civil service employees to use of outside service providers, i.e., outsourcing of intelligence work. This was totally in line with the preferences of the U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, who introduced outsourcing in a generalized way to deal with the new challenges of the War On Terror.

The same phenomenon affected the U.S. military, especially beginning in 2003 following the invasion of Iraq. Operational security tasks of the U.S. military were outsourced to companies providing mercenaries like Blackwater. And normal procurement arrangements for materiel were short-circuited by the Vice President for the sake of quick satisfaction of urgent field requirements: hence the procurement of non-traditional but much needed fleets of armored troop transport and the like.

Several articles in Consortium News and elsewhere in recent months have called attention to the phenomenon of intel outsourcing. However, what was happening, why and to what effect was already clearly known a decade ago and promised nothing good.

In a sense, the commonality of all these changes in supply of intelligence, equipment and military force has been a quick-fix mentality and direct political intervention into processes that had been insulated in the civil service with its bureaucratic procedures. Political intervention means ultimately *politicizing* methods and outcomes. Outsourced intelligence is more likely to

meet the demands of the paymaster than to have some intellectual integrity and broad perspective of its own.

To better understand the phenomenon, I refer the reader to an outstanding and well documented article dating from March 2007 that was published by the European Strategic Intelligence Security Center (ESISC) entitled "Outsourcing Intelligence: The Example of the United States."

The author, ESISC Research Associate Raphael Ramos, tells us that at the time 70% of the budget of the American intelligence community was spent via contracts with private companies. At the time he wrote, outsourcing was said to be greatest among the agencies reporting to the Defense Department. The CIA was then said to have one-third of its staff coming from private companies.

Besides the changing priorities for foreign intelligence resulting from the end of the Cold War and the onset of the War on Terror, another factor in the changing structure of US intelligence was technologically driven. This relates to the modern communications technologies, with many start-ups appearing in the specialized fields of Signals Intelligence and Imagery Intelligence. The NSA availed itself of these new service providers to become a pioneer in outsourcing intelligence.

Other Pentagon agencies which followed the same course were the National Reconnaissance Office, responsible for space based systems of intelligence and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, charged with producing geographic intelligence from satellites. Add to that the changing intel practices coming from the development of the internet, which prioritized open source intelligence. OSINT could flourish in the private sector because it does not require special security clearances. This soon accounted for between 35% and 90% of intelligence procurement.

As noted above, outsourcing enabled the intelligence community to modernize, gain skills quickly and try to meet urgent new needs. However, judging by the results of intelligence with respect to Putin's Russia it seems that the outsourcing model has not delivered the goods. The country has been flying blind while taking outlandish and unsupportable positions to bully the world as if we enjoyed full spectrum dominance and Russia did not exist.

Gilbert Doctorow, an independent political analyst based in Brussels, is serving as an international observer to the March 18 presidential election in Russia. His latest book, *Does the United States Have a Future?* was published in October 2017. Both paperback and e-book versions are available for purchase on www.amazon.com and all affiliated Amazon websites worldwide.

Who Benefits from Russia's 'Peculiar' Doping Violations?

The Winter Olympics concluded with two Russian athletes testing positive for banned substances. But the doping would have made little sense in terms of gaining a competitive edge, leading Rick Sterling to wonder who benefits?

By Rick Sterling

Viewers of the 2018 Winter Olympics were offered a constant reminder of Russia's supposed deviousness with the "OAR" – or Olympic Athlete from Russia – designation that Russian athletes competed under as a punishment for doping. The image of Russia being penalized for cheating fit in neatly with ongoing geopolitical narratives of Russia being blamed for election meddling in the United States and military aggression in Ukraine.

President Vladimir Putin had claimed earlier that the U.S. invented the doping allegations in an attempt to influence Russia's March 18 presidential election, a position reiterated by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov who claimed that the U.S. had used its influence within the International Olympic Committee to "orchestrate the doping scandal."

But despite these Russian claims, the image of Russia as a cheater were re-confirmed at the close of the Olympic Games when two additional Russians were caught using banned substances.

Yet, there is something very fishy about the Anti Doping Rule Violations (ADRVs) pinned on the Russian curler and Russian bobsledder during the final week of the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics.

It defies logic that an athlete would do a one-time consumption of a chemical that is of no value in circumstances where it is almost certain to be detected with huge negative consequences.

That is precisely the situation. The Russian Mixed Curling bronze medal winner, Alexander Krushelnitsky, had to forfeit his medal, plus that of his partner wife, because traces of meldonium were found in his urine sample. He had previously tested clean. Meldonium is a medication which helps keep the heart healthy by increasing blood flow.

That would be of no benefit in a sport like curling which requires accuracy, strategy and focus but is not taxing physically. The "sweeping" to help guide

the rock down the ice lasts only 20 seconds or less. International curlers were astounded at the news and bemused at the idea of performance enhancing drugs (PEDs) for curling. The skip of the Danish curling team said "I think most people will laugh and ask, 'what could you possibly need doping for?'"

Krushelnitsky strongly denies taking banned drugs. "I am categorically opposed to doping. ... never, at any time that I have been involved in sport, have I ever used prohibited substances."

Similar curious circumstances apply in the second ADRV. Russian bobsledder Nadezhda Sergeeva had numerous negative (clean) tests before she was tested positive for banned trimetazidine. Bobsledding is another sport which requires physical and mental skill but not physical endurance.

In the February 25 IOC meeting to close the Pyeongchang Winter Games, the head of the IOC Implementation Group, Nicole Hovertz, said the Russian athletes had been tested "more than any other athletes." She and her group were convinced that the 168-member Russian athletic team was clean. At about 82:00 in the video, she says the two Russian doping violations were "so peculiar."

She introduced the Director of the IOC Medical and Scientific Commission, Dr. Bludgett, to provide more detail. He suggested that meldonium would not be of benefit in curling. He then went further and suggested the ADRV regarding trimetazidine may be in error. He said trimetazidine "is a substance where there is a parent compound which is a common headache migraine treatment available particularly in China and Japan and if that is found then it is not considered an ADRV. And if there is a very low level, as there was in this case, that is a possibility."

Sergeeva denies ever taking banned drugs and even went on social media with a T-shirt declaring her commitment to clean sport.

In summary, it seems highly unlikely that two different Russian athletes would intentionally take medications that have no benefit but which are almost guaranteed to be detected resulting in huge harm to them and their team.

Who Benefits?

Another possibility is that meldonium or trimetazidine powder was surreptitiously put in the food of the athletes. This one-time consumption would cause a positive test.

In fact there are forces on the international scene who are pleased that Russia has been battling defamation and charges of "state sponsored doping" for the past two years. They want the current denigration and punishments of Russia to

continue, perhaps influencing Russia's upcoming national election and undermining Russia's hosting of the World Cup this summer.

One such group is the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The CIA has a long history of large and small criminal deeds. Presumably it would not be difficult for them to infiltrate Olympic facilities or bribe a corrupt individual to put traces of meldonium or another powder in someone's food or drink.

Those who quickly dismiss this possibility probably also thought that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction in 2002. That was a false claim supported by evidence fabricated by the CIA.

It is well documented the CIA carries out murders, coups and major sabotage. The CIA has documented some of their methods in "The Official CIA Manual of Trickery and Deception". They don't just carry out assassinations and coups. In the book "In Search of Enemies", former CIA officer John Stockwell documented how the CIA created a false story about Cuban soldiers raping Angolan women to defame Cuba.

Corrupt police forces sometimes plant evidence on a suspect they wish to convict. It would be essentially the same thing to get a Russian athlete to ingest spiked food or beverage. The CIA has motive and expressed intent:

In contrast with Russian leaders who call the US a "partner", US officials increasingly call Russia an "adversary". The latest US National Security Strategy explicitly says they intend to respond to Russia as an adversary: "The United States will respond to the growing political, economic and military competitions we face around the world. China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity."

Despite the lack of clear evidence, there is widespread belief that Russia "meddled" in the US election. The anti-Russia sentiment has been fanned into the exaggerated claim that the unproven Russian action was "an act of war, an act of hybrid warfare".

Neoconservative forces openly talk about "punishing" Russia. The former Deputy Director of the CIA, Michael Morrell, said, "We need to make the Russians pay a price." He confirmed on public television that means killing Russians (and Iranians) in Syria. This is the 33-year veteran CIA leader who publicly campaigned for Hillary Clinton.

Did the CIA plant the doping evidence? We don't know for certain but it should not be dismissed out of hand. The CIA has the means, opportunity and above all the motive to falsely implicate Russians in new doping cases with the goal of preventing Russia from getting beyond the international sporting sanctions and

punishments. They have done vastly more deceitful, manipulative, and outrageous things than this.

Media Bias

Unfortunately, Western media will not investigate this possibility. Western media cannot even accurately report on events like the IOC meeting yesterday. The fact that the head of the IOC Implementation Group warmly praised the Russian participation at the Pyeongchang Olympics is not mentioned in Western media.

The fact that Dr. Bludgett raised questions about the accuracy of the ADRVs against Russia is not mentioned in reports from New York Times, the Guardian or Inside the Games. Instead, the writer at Inside the Games once again exaggerated the voice of critics of Russia as he downplayed the voices of international athletes who want to put the doping scandal behind and move forward.

Western media have reported deceptively that the Russian athletes have “admitted” to the violations. In fact, both Russian athletes strongly deny taking banned drugs.

Western media bias is also shown in the focus on alleged Russian doping and minimization or ignoring of other possible violations. For example the story about the Norwegian cross-country ski team and their use of banned asthmatic medications. They get around the restrictions by having their doctor claim that most of their athletes are asthmatic. This situation is a result of the inconsistent rules and regulations. A Therapeutic Use Exemption (TUE) can be given to any athlete designated by a doctor and in secrecy. They are not required to publicly disclose this, giving incentive to corruption and misuse.

Richard McLaren’s Bias

The World Anti Doping Agency (WADA) has also been biased. More than a year ago, their investigator Richard McLaren claimed “over one thousand Russian athletes benefited” from the alleged Russian conspiracy to cheat the ant-doping system. McLaren said the proof would be provided to the various sport federations. In September 2017 it was revealed that charges had been filed against 96 athletes.

Of these, WADA cleared 95 athletes of wrongdoing; only one athlete was proven to be in violation. More recently, the Court of Arbitration in Sport completely overturned the bans on 28 Russian athletes. In summary, it appears that McLaren’s accusation about “over one thousand athletes benefiting” was a huge exaggeration or fabrication.

Where Do Things Go From Here?

The IOC Executive Board has indicated they intend to lift the suspension of the Russian Olympic Committee if no more “anti doping rule violations” are found in the last batch of athlete samples from the Pyeongchang Olympics. The results are expected in a few days.

Another ADRV may appear. If so, that will greatly complicate the effort to reintegrate Russian athletics. Even if the final tests are all clean, those who oppose Russia will continue trying to delay or prevent the full integration of Russia within the world sporting community.

The former Moscow Laboratory Director Grigory Rodchenkov is the primary weapon in the campaign accusing Russia of “state sponsored doping.”

The Russians have been accused of trying to murder Rodchenkov. But if he suddenly dies one day, it is more likely to be by the CIA. At this point, Rodchenkov has done all the damage he can to Russian sports. The only thing he could possibly do is to recant or fall apart. His handlers have prevented him from appearing before the various committees looking into the accusations. At this point, Rodchenkov could be more valuable dead than alive. His death would be a powerful weapon to disrupt the normalization of relations with Russia.

In conclusion, going back to the Pyeongchang Olympics, there should be caution before assuming the guilt of the Russian athletes who received ADRVs. It makes no sense that two Russian athletes would take useless medications knowing they will be tested and found out.

The doping incident serves the interests of those in the West who seek more not less conflict and seek to weaken Russia through “hybrid” warfare. The CIA has the means, opportunity and motive, as well as the experience and history.

If this is true, it’s another example of the dangerous descent in international relations. The Olympics movement has the goal of fostering peaceful relations. The sad truth is there are forces who want to prevent that. They prefer to demonize and divide in a quest for economic and geopolitical supremacy over “adversaries.” International sports is just another arena for them.

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

First Impressions of Russia’s Upcoming

Presidential Election

Despite the near certainty of Vladimir Putin's reelection in the Russian presidential election next month, the campaign is nevertheless competitive with an array of choices, notes Gilbert Doctorow in this first of three articles on the election.

By Gilbert Doctorow

On Monday, February 18, one month before election day, Russia's presidential campaign moved into high gear. On that day, the Central Election Commission allocated to the candidates several hours each of free publicity on the five federal television channels, on major radio networks and free space in print media with national circulation.

This comes on top of daily news coverage of each and every candidate's activities in the field and invitations to appear on leading television talk shows and interviews which are dispensed by media producers at their option. And it is rounded out by advertising paid for by the electoral headquarters of the eight candidates.

The net result is that domestic politics are jostling with Olympics coverage and international news for the attention of the broad Russian public, and will continue to do so until the Day of Silence, 17 March, when the campaigns shut down in anticipation of the balloting the next day.

In the West, election news from Russia carried by mainstream media has centered on Alexei Navalny. Prior to his disqualification as a candidate by the Central Election Commission in December, he was characterized as posing the only real threat to Vladimir Putin's hold on power through his popular exposes of official and corporate corruption disseminated virally on social media and YouTube. All others in the race were put down as Kremlin controlled and tolerated only to give sham elections an appearance of authenticity.

When his candidacy was rejected due to an earlier criminal conviction, Navalny issued a call to boycott the election. He launched unsanctioned street demonstrations in Moscow and elsewhere, leading to scuffles with the police. Some of his supporters and Navalny himself were arrested and later released. But the protests were all on a small scale and Western media quickly lost interest.

Meet the Candidates

Now attention has refocused to the 36-year-old celebrity candidate Ksenia Sobchak, Russia's own Paris Hilton, a television personality who brought glamor,

youth and a novel "vote against all" or "none of the above" slogan in support of her candidacy. It bears mentioning that Sobchak would be the first female candidate for the Russian presidency since 2004. In December 2017, she was quickly slotted into the race by winning support from the pro-Liberal "Civic Initiative" party, giving her a nationwide organizational presence and reduced requirements for gathering signatures of supporters to be registered.

In her first speeches on the campaign trail, Sobchak called out the abuses and inefficiency of the Russian bureaucracy. But her main fire was directed against the very stability of the Putin regime with its immutable elite and opposition leaders who have moved from middle age to pension age before her eyes and seem intent on remaining in office to the very end.

To this she added a number of foreign policy positions drawn from the liberal opposition that were sure to win her the attention and support of the West even if they ran against the clear preferences of the vast majority of the population as spelled out in the polls: namely her condemnation of the reunification with Crimea as a violation of international law and her insistence that there was no threat to Russia from NATO expansion.

Indeed, while her fellow candidates were traveling around their vast country to meet with voters, earlier this month Ksenia Sobchak made a trip to the United States, where among other activities, she was feted at the Center for International Strategic Studies in Washington, D.C. Her talk was piquantly entitled "Russia's Post-Authoritarian Future."

In the current international context, Sobchak's foreign policy positions and her cultivation of political support in the U.S. are seen as borderline treasonous behavior that falls into the tradition of the liberal opposition leaders in the Parnas political movement, Boris Nemtsov and Mikhail Kasyanov. In 2011, Nemtsov famously traveled to Arizona to see U.S. Senator John McCain and lend his support to American sanctions against Russia over alleged human rights abuses. Put inversely, Sobchak's American hosts receiving her in the midst of the presidential elections were necessarily guilty of egregious meddling in Russian domestic affairs.

The first poll results in January gave Sobchak about 1% of the electorate and little has changed since. However, in the same time frame there was great dynamism in the popular support for the candidate of the Communist Party, Pavel Grudinin, trending well over 10% and putting him in second place after Vladimir Putin, who enjoys the support of 70% likely voters. Despite their habitual disregard of the Communists, Western journalists took an interest. The fact that Grudinin was not a Communist Party member made his personality all the more intriguing.

Surprisingly friendly articles about Grudin in began appearing in *The Financial Times* among other mainstream outlets. They highlighted the fact that he had made his mark as director of a prosperous farm complex in the Moscow region where he paid his workers more than double the national average salary and offered pre-school care, subsidized housing, free medical care and other social benefits from the Soviet era which he pledged to generalize across the country if elected. Grudin in was speaking the language of European social democracy, if you will, making a very agreeable contrast with the orthodox Communist ideology of the Party standard bearer in the previous four presidential elections going back to 1996, Gennadi Zyuganov.

With a likable demeanor, quiet self-confidence and enjoying the support of the country's largest full-scale national political machine after the United Russia ruling party backing Putin, Grudin in very quickly found himself in the crosshairs of the Kremlin elites.

The main news broadcasters Pervy Kanal and Rossiya-1 initiated regular coverage of a protest movement against Grudin in over allegations impugning his management of the Lenin State Farm that is his model for the future development of Russia: it was said that he had wrongfully cheated more than half of the farm's cooperative members-employees out of their shares during the 1990s and that the wealth of the farm came not from selling strawberries and other produce but from windfall profits in the disposal of some of its land holdings to developers. A second line of attack is that Grudin in had not declared a couple of bank accounts he held abroad.

From polls taken in mid-February, it would appear that this constant barrage of negative news halted the trending in Grudin in's favor and possibly dented his numbers. Nonetheless, with 7% of voters polled declaring their intention to vote for the Communist Party candidate, he remains second to Putin and just ahead of the anti-Communist, nationalist party of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (LDPR).

Nonetheless, the ruling party is clearly not taking any chances and will be unrelenting in its attacks. The Sunday, February 18 edition of the widely viewed *News of the Week* program on Rossiya-1 dwelled for about 10 minutes on the Communists. Presenter Dmitry Kiselyov used questionable poll figures on voting intentions of Party members to argue that the decision to back the non-Party Grudin in opened the Communists to an internal division, with less than half its members prepared to vote for him. Kiselyov predicted the party's demise and called upon its leader Gennadi Zyuganov to reverse his decision and withdraw his support, this is the name of solicitude for Russia's still new and fragile democracy.

This particular report by Kiselyov seems to have little if any factual basis.

The notion that Grudinin's candidacy splits the Left runs counter to the process that led to his selection in the first place. That process bears mention here since it seems not to have been picked up by Western media.

In fact, many of the Left political movements, entailing more than a hundred organizations led by the Left Front and the Communist Party, collectively held primaries in which Grudinin won in a second-stage run-off. It was on this basis of his being a unity candidate of the Left that Gennady Zyuganov put Grudinin's name forward within his own party and then assumed the position of his campaign manager.

In the face of the various attacks from the Russian state news programs and in personal interviews on air from ill-disposed hosts, Grudinin has shown himself to be cool-headed and genial. In his 37-minute long January interview with Vladimir Solovyov on Rossiya-1, Grudinin managed to withstand harsh questioning and to get out his political program and beliefs, even forcing the presenter to acknowledge some common perspectives on the country's ills and to smile at some of his repartee.

Foreign Policy Continuity

Grudinin calls for continuity in the country's foreign policy, to the point where he says he would keep in office Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Instead, the changes he seeks are in domestic policy. To ensure the social benefits mentioned above, he would introduce a progressive income tax, freeing the poor from tax but imposing a substantial levy on the wealthy. Moreover, he would require repatriation of oligarchs' wealth from abroad and ensure there would be no further private export of capital offshore. Finally, he would channel all profits from the country's oil and gas industry into the state coffers, while acting strictly through the law and independent courts. Heady stuff!

Coming in third in the mid-February polls with 5% electoral support, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is the candidate who has been receiving the most television air time now for months as a nearly daily guest on both principal talk shows produced by Rossiya-1, *Sixty Minutes* and *Evening with Vladimir Soloviev*. On these shows he is allowed by the indulgent presenters to dominate discussion, delivering a stream of outrageous comments on Russia's past, on relations with the United States and more that have great entertainment value even if they are far removed from day to day politics.

Thus, even in the "debate" between Zhirinovskiy and Grudinin which the popular talk show *Sixty Minutes* hosted a couple of weeks ago, and which has gathered more than 4 million "hits" on youtube, the LDPR leader was allowed to hog the

microphone and Grudin in was doubly under pressure from the few questions pitched to him by the moderator.

Apart from his insistence on taking a strong stand against American provocations in Syria, in Ukraine, in its sanctions list, Zhirinovskiy's platform focuses on domestic concerns like all other candidates. He decries unemployment levels, low living standards, unaffordable housing, for-pay medical care and education.

However, while calling for social welfare that is not dissimilar to the Communist Party's program, Zhirinovskiy denounces the Soviet past for running a dysfunctional economy and for misguided internationalism at the expense of the welfare of the Russian people. Says Zhirinovskiy, the United States uses its foreign policy to bring in wealth, while the Soviet Union, and to a lesser degree Russia today only loses wealth on foreign adventures.

Zhirinovskiy's main target in his campaign is not the ruling United Russia party but the Communists. In his television appearances he is a pit bull against Grudin in. For his support to Putin in the last Duma elections, Zhirinovskiy's party was rewarded with the chairmanship of the Duma's Foreign Affairs Committee. One may assume that if his run against Grudin in works, Zhirinovskiy and/or his party will get additional political spoils, perhaps at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself.

For Youth and Daring

The opening of the Russian airwaves to promotional video clips, both free and paid for by the candidates, added an important new dimension by which their objectives and electoral prospects can be measured. Since no one in Russia or in the West seems to have made use of these new metrics, I will take the plunge in what follows.

First, the latest television spots for Ksenia Sobchak are head and shoulders above all other Russian electoral advertising. Both in terms of concept and in terms of execution, they bear the fingerprints of top international corporate public relations talent. Sobchak has been re-packaged and her entire message is concentrated in two words that are positive, attractive and impactful: “?? ????????? ? ?????????” – “for youth and daring.” This contrasts with her previously negative appeal of “none of the above” and matches the flair of Vladimir Putin's own campaign slogan “a strong President for a strong country.”

Sobchak's coiffure, her dress, her entire image has been reconfigured to combine seriousness of purpose with womanly as opposed to girlish appeal. If she can stay to script on the campaign trail, the new Sobchak may be expected to multiply several fold the votes she draws on election day. This assumes she is

not undone by alternative videos posted on YouTube by her enemies, contrasting the new idol of the creative classes in Moscow with her recent past as a narcissistic reality TV star. In any case, Sobchak's results will not threaten Vladimir Putin, but may set in place a credible foundation for further development of her political career in coming years.

Second in sophistication to Sobchak are the latest videos posted by the Yabloko candidate Grigory Yavlinsky. The perpetual candidate of this liberal party born in the 1990s that has enjoyed support among urban intellectuals in the two capitals, Moscow and St. Petersburg, Yavlinsky has waged a low-key campaign and raised assorted issues like animal welfare in his talks on the campaign trail.

One new video clip repeats insistently the theme that Russians as a people have been inventive and at the cutting edge of technology for at least a couple of centuries but have been let down by their state and political culture. Meanwhile his latest video can easily be confused for a message from the Central Election Commission urging the population not to stay at home, not to watch the political process with folded arms but to go and vote on election day. Only in the last couple of seconds is the candidate himself identified. The clear purpose of this advert is to discredit Alexei Navalny and his call for a boycott.

Yavlinsky knows his chances of winning the presidency based on his fraction of a percent of popular support are nil, and this video suggests he has decided to use his opportunity as a candidate with air time to discredit the non-systemic and authoritarian Navalny. This is a variant of Zhirinovskiy's attacks on Grudinin: candidates devouring one another while leaving the enormously popular Putin untouched.

Apart from Sobchak and Yavlinsky, the remaining challengers to Putin and United Russia have posted promotional videos which are primitive in both concept and execution, none more so than the videos of LDPR candidate Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. In contrast to the relaxed and confidential tone of Sobchak and Yavlinsky, Zhirinovskiy is intense and aggressive. He denounces poverty, unemployment and social injustice while making empty, unsupported promises of a bright future if he is elected. It is a safe bet that Zhirinovskiy took no counsel from PR professionals and relied solely on his own instincts.

The Communist Party videos on behalf of Pavel Grudinin are also lacking in sophistication and emotional appeal. They do the candidate no favors. It is hard to say whether Grudinin's greater air time on talk shows and the like due to his leads in polls against the rest of the non-Putin field and his own relaxed and attractive personality can compensate for the official media attacks and the disservice of mediocre advertising support from the Communist Party. Notwithstanding these deficiencies, it is entirely possible that Grudinin's

ballot count on March 18 will be substantially higher than the polls now suggest. Not enough to force a run-off against Putin, but sufficient to revise expectations in the Party's favor during the next Duma elections.

Those in the West who have viewed the Russian presidential election of 2018 with disdain because of the near certainty that Vladimir Putin will win are missing the point. In the candidacies of Sobchak and Grudinin, in particular, we see the jostling for power in the next legislative elections of 2021 between what are new generation Right and Left forces directed against the centrist ruling United Russia Party. All of this will greatly affect the post-Putin succession process which will set in by 2022 given the "lame duck" phenomenon as the President's men make their own moves to secure their future without him.

Gilbert Doctorow, an independent political analyst based in Brussels, is serving as an international observer to the March 18 presidential election in Russia. His latest book, *Does the United States Have a Future?* was published on 12 October 2017. Both paperback and e-book versions are available for purchase on www.amazon.com and all affiliated Amazon websites worldwide.

Mutually Assured Contempt at 2018 Munich Security Conference

The 2018 Munich Security Conference continued the trend of promoting a New Cold War while diplomats openly disparaged Russia and fretted over the Trump presidency, Gilbert Doctorow reports.

By Gilbert Doctorow

The annual Munich Security Conference is to geopolitics what Davos is to global economics: a forum for public discussion of challenges and trends, as well as a venue for side meetings off the official schedule by Very Important People that are at times even more intriguing than the formal events. By the latter I have in mind, for example, the tête-à-tête behind closed doors between former Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and the Russian ambassador to Germany that set tongues wagging back in Kiev and Moscow, even if it was passed up in the Euronews coverage.

The very biggest names in global politics make their appearances at Munich and occasionally catch the imagination of all with substantive as opposed to merely clever remarks. No one familiar with the venue can forget Vladimir Putin's speech there of February 2007. It set in motion the open challenge to US global mastery that has evolved into the deep cracks in the world order which were the main theme of Munich a year ago, and which presented themselves again for consideration in the latest, 2018 edition, which took place 16-18 February.



Last year the biggest name in Munich was Chinese President Xi, who did not disappoint and stole the show by his robust defense of free trade, global cooperation to combat climate change and other leading issues of the day from which Donald Trump's America seemed to be retreating. This year there was no one leader who commanded the attention of the audience and media. What special meaning the gathering had could be found in the Report of the organizers, which highlights the issues and guided the discussion in the various sessions over three days.

Parsing an 88-page text like the Report might be a step too far. But a word about its style is in order since that takes us directly to analysis of its content.

The Munich Security Conference takes place in Germany. Its website and promotional literature are bilingual, German-English. However, the Report is in English, and in very special English at that. No British spelling or turns of speech here, unlike so many documents of think tanks generated on the Continent. No this is the American English of the U.S establishment in the self-satisfied and coy style of *Foreign Affairs* magazine. Where else would you find section headings entitled "Russia: Bearly Strong?" or "United States: Home Alone?"

And while the texts in the Report allude to interviews in the press by former German Foreign Minister Walter Steinmeier, and a side column quotes from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's speech to the Conference last year, there is more than a sprinkling of references to leading personalities in America's Council on Foreign Relations, starting with its president, Richard Haass. And what is surely the most remarkable quote in the Report (see below) comes from Council member and long-time book reviewer for *Foreign Affairs*, Princeton University professor G. John Ikenberry.

To cut to the quick, the American input to the agenda and posture of the Munich

Security Conference is of decisive weight when you look at the recommended reading ("Food for Thought") and special reports sections at the back. In the Acknowledgements section at the very end, we find the heavyweights RAND Corporation, North Atlantic Treaty Organization and NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence listed together with the lightweight but very voluble Freedom House.

This Establishment is Atlanticist, a promoter of the liberal institutional order that it helped to create over the past 60 plus years in the knowledge that the biggest financial and political beneficiary of an order based on rules written in Washington has been the United States. To a man, they are anti-Trump.

Indeed, the text of the Munich Report drips with anti-Trump innuendo and a good dose of despair over the ongoing triumph of the anti-Christ who is currently the U.S. President.

The introductory chapter of the Report bears the ominous title: "Present at the Erosion: International Order on the Brink?" The most striking remark on its first page is by G. John Ikenberry: "The world's most powerful state has begun to sabotage the order it created. A hostile revisionist power has indeed arrived on the scene, but it sits in the Oval Office, the beating heart of the free world."

Let us remember that over the course of his career Ikenberry has been a penetrating and at times courageous analyst. Back in 1992, he co-authored with Daniel Deudney a splendid article entitled "Who Won the Cold War" (*Foreign Policy*) explaining why it was a draw, ended by mutual agreement. He thereby went directly against the rising tide of neoconservatism and American hubris built on falsification of modern history.

American Establishment biases, willful ignorance of realities and fake news are given free rein in the page of the 2018 Report devoted to Russia. Here we read about the Kremlin's "disinformation campaign" during the French presidential election of 2017 and about the "efforts to influence the U.S. presidential election in 2016" that have "paid dividends." Unproven allegations of meddling and illogical conclusions about dividends, considering the track record of the Trump administration in its first year in office: the dispatch of lethal military equipment to Ukraine that even Obama hesitated to approve, the extension of sanctions and a number of other measures raising the tensions with Russia in the Baltics and in Syria.

Here we find the stubborn refusal to accept the true scale and breadth of Russia's might. We are reminded that the country's GDP is the size of Spain, a proposition that is distorted and misleading depending as it does on exchange

rates rather than purchasing power parity. At last report, Spain was not supplying one-third of all the natural gas consumed in Europe; Russia was. At last report, Spain did not have a military budget that is second only to the United States; Russia has.

Yet, the Munich Security Conference differs in an important way from the American establishment, which is today not very welcoming of “adversaries” or “competitors” who may conceptualize the world order in their own way. Whatever its home grounds philosophically, the Munich Security Conference does try to be inclusive and brings even troublemaker countries and personalities into the tent. Moreover, the Security Conference, like Davos, has substantial continuity in the attendees. You heard from the Iranian Foreign Minister last year, and you will hear from him again this year, and probably next year as well. This does not smooth out all the rough edges in these encounters, but it keeps them somewhat in check.

One of the “regulars,” and perhaps the most remarkable performer at the 2018 Munich Security Conference was Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. I call him remarkable because of his ability to rise above his detractors in the hall through superior command of the facts, wit and daring.

At last year’s Munich Conference, a number of Lavrov’s pronouncements were met by derisive laughter from the Americans in the front rows, picked up by other Western diplomats and politicians. Yet, Lavrov took it in stride, remarking acidly that he had also found some statements by representatives of other countries to be laughable but had shown greater restraint than members of his audience.

Heckling also took place during Lavrov’s speech this year, though on a markedly lower scale. And once again, Lavrov took the upper hand, chided his detractors for their incivility and joked that it did not matter: “after all, they say laughter helps us live longer.”

Lavrov’s speech itself was a masterpiece of argumentation against the exclusion of Russia from the common European home, the descent of a divisive “us/them” thinking in Western Europe to justify the New Cold War. He specifically called out for condemnation the ongoing rewriting of history in the Baltic States, in Poland, and in Ukraine that airbrushes Russia out of the victory over Nazi Germany, encourages destruction of monuments to Soviet liberators and makes heroes of home-grown fascist movements as in Ukraine.

It bears mention that back home in Moscow, there are voices of strident nationalists like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy who explain on national television day after day why it is time for Lavrov to go, because he is too soft, too easy

going with the nation's enemies in the West.

However, the skill at debate, nerves of steel and icy reserve that Lavrov displayed in Munich show yet again that he is the right man in the right place to defend Putin's Russia.

The problem that comes out of the Report and the body language we saw in the conference proceedings is the following: whether the opposing sides of East and West were more or less restrained in their gestures and words, there lies on each side a poisonous contempt for the other that could lead to miscalculations and rash actions in the event of some incident, some mishap between our respective armed forces in any of the theaters where they are now operating in close proximity in support of opposing sides.

Gilbert Doctorow is an independent political analyst based in Brussels. His latest book, *Does the United States Have a Future?* was published on 12 October 2017. Both paperback and e-book versions are available for purchase on www.amazon.com and all affiliated Amazon websites worldwide.

Anti-Trumpists Use Mueller Indictments to Escalate Tensions With Nuclear-Armed Russia

Special Prosecutor Robert Mueller's indictment of 13 alleged members of a Russian troll farm is leading to calls for escalation with Russia, exacerbating tensions that are already at historic – and dangerous – lows, observes Caitlin Johnstone.

By Caitlin Johnstone

U.S. empire loyalists are so close to telling the truth when they babble about "Russian propaganda." They are openly admitting that it is wrong to use media to manipulate the ways that Americans think and vote. Now all we need is for them to admit that they themselves do this constantly, and we'll be on the right track.

The word "Russians" is America's top trend on Twitter at the time of this writing because of a Mueller indictment of 13 alleged members of a Russian troll farm, those nefarious supervillains who posted pictures of puppies and promoted Bernie Sanders to "sow discord in the U.S. political system, including the 2016

U.S. election.”

Predictably, no evidence is added to cohesively tie the establishment Russia narrative together with allegations of Russia hacking the Democratic Party and giving their emails to WikiLeaks, meeting with Donald Trump, Jr. at Trump Tower, any shenanigans with well-hydrated Russian prostitutes, or indeed anything tying the troll farm to Trump or the Russian government at all.

The focus instead is on people disguising their identities to troll Americans on social media, which we have now learned constitutes a “conspiracy to defraud the United States.” As Disobedient Media’s Elizabeth Lea Vos rightly points out, it is also behavior that the Hillary Clinton campaign is known to have funded and engaged in extensively.

In response to this underwhelming revelation, Democrats and Never-Trumpers are howling for new Cold War escalations with Russia. This despite the fact that this administration has already killed Russians in Syria, greatly escalated nuclear tensions with Russia, allowed the sale of arms to Ukraine (a move Obama refused for fear of angering Moscow), established a permanent military presence in Syria with the goal of effecting regime change, forced RT and Sputnik to register as foreign agents, expanded NATO with the addition of Montenegro, assigned Russia hawk Kurt Volker as special representative to Ukraine, shut down a Russian consulate in San Francisco and expelled Russian diplomats as part of continued back-and-forth hostile diplomatic exchanges.

We are already at an extremely dangerous point in the ongoing trend of continuous escalations with a country that is armed with thousands of nuclear warheads. And these deranged lunatics want more.

“Special Counsel Mueller’s indictments are further proof that Vladimir Putin directed a campaign to interfere with our elections, with the goal of tipping the outcome,” tweeted Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer. “Given these indictments, @realDonaldTrump should implement the sanctions that Congress passed immediately.”

Steven Schmidt, MSNBC analyst and former strategist for George W. Bush and John McCain, said that the word “meddling” is not a sufficiently inflammatory word, because “What Russia did is ATTACK the United States. Trump and the Corrupted GOP majority refuse to defend the sovereignty of the country from this outside THREAT from a hostile state actor.”

Congressmen Ted Lieu and Adam Schiff, Senator Bernie Sanders, popular commentators Preet Bharara and Joe Walsh have all joined in the pile-on, along with many, many others, all demanding that the president do more to escalate

tensions with Russia even further than he already has.

This is exactly what renowned U.S.-Russian relations expert Stephen Cohen has been warning of: an extremely dangerous mixture of continually escalating Cold War tensions coexisting with hot proxy wars between two nuclear superpowers, with a president facing immense political pressures to keep advancing and never, ever back down. A narcissist in the White House being baited by his political enemies into a game of nuclear “chicken,” without the ability to swerve when necessary.

Meanwhile what are Republicans talking about? Why, they’re all crowding about the fact that these Russia revelations began on Obama’s watch and don’t show collusion, of course.

Do you see what is happening here? There is never, ever going to be any proof of Trump-Russia collusion, because that has never been what this is about. We’ve talked about this before: America’s unelected power establishment doesn’t care about impeaching Trump, it cares about hobbling Russia in order to prevent the rise of a potential rival superpower in its ally China. All this lunacy makes perfect sense when you realize this. The U.S. deep state is using the hysterical cult of anti-Trumpism to manufacture support for increasing escalations with Russia, and the anti-Trumpists are playing right along under the delusion that pushing for moves against Russia will hurt Trump.

Well they will not hurt Trump, because there has never been any Trump-Russia collusion. If there had been it would have been picked up by America’s sprawling surveillance networks and leaked to the Washington Post before the end of 2016, and if Trump were a Putin puppet he wouldn’t be continually escalating toward direct conflict with Russia in ways his predecessor Obama never would have dreamed of doing. They aren’t hurting Trump with these loud cries for increased sanctions and hawkishness, they’re imperiling us all.

Democrats, it is time to stop letting them bait you into calling for even more escalations with a nuclear superpower and start calling for detente instead. Republicans, it is time for you to stop putting partisan politics ahead of the survival of our species and start pushing against these dangerous escalations that your president has been playing right along with. These escalations are extremely dangerous and getting ever more so, and in the name of all that is holy I implore you to stop before the unthinkable happens.

On my knees I beg you all to stop this madness, for the sake of my children and yours. You lunatics on both sides of the political divide are going to get us all killed. In God’s name, stop. Please.

Caitlin Johnstone is a rogue journalist, poet, and utopia prepper who publishes regularly at [Medium](#). Follow her work on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or her [website](#). She has a [podcast](#) and a new book [Woke: A Field Guide for Utopia Preppers](#). This article was re-published with permission.

Russiagate Narrative Undercut by Nunes Memo

The key allegations of election meddling at the heart of Russiagate continue to lack supporting evidence, while on the other hand, evidence of overreach by investigators undermines the narrative of Trump-Russia collusion, reports Philip Giraldi.

By Philip Giraldi

The so-called [Nunes Memo](#) prepared for the Republican majority on the House of Representatives Intelligence Committee – even if possibly overblown – provides strong reason to believe that there was unwarranted and quite possibly illegal FBI surveillance of a former Trump staffer over completely legal Russian business dealings. Meanwhile, regarding the key allegations of election meddling at the heart of Russiagate, the nine month-long investigation of Special Counsel Robert Mueller into Moscow's possible interference has so far only shown that it was [Israel rather than Russia that meddled](#) with the campaign by meeting with Trump associates and seeking favors.

Notably missing is any evidence that the Russian government did anything beyond the usual probing that intelligence agencies worldwide do when confronted by important developments in another country that is either a competitor or adversary.

An aspect of the Republican memo that has been scarcely commented upon in the avalanche of news reporting centered on the story is how the mainstream media is continuing to exercise a [dangerous obsession with Russia](#) and is insisting that the Russiagate inquiry should continue even more aggressively in spite of the concerns that the entire process has been politicized. There is nothing in the memo itself that indicates that Moscow actually tried to recruit any Trump associate as an agent or interfere in the U.S. election. The *raison d'être* for both the Congressional and Special Counsel Robert Mueller investigations therefore appears to be lacking. It might eventually emerge that Russia did little or even nothing beyond the usual probing and nosing around that

intelligence agencies routinely do.

President Donald Trump, who had campaigned on a sensible pledge to seek better relations with Moscow, has provided only feeble resistance to the onslaught of the media and political class. He has recently allowed the Justice Department and Treasury to punish Russia's two major news outlets operating in the United States, RT America and Sputnik. They both have been forced to register as foreign agents, even though no other non-American news service operating in the United States has been compelled to do the same, while new allegations about perfidious Moscow surface weekly.

Two recent news reports illustrate perfectly just how out-of-control the Russia inquiry has become. At the end of January, the U.S. Treasury Department released the names of 210 alleged Kremlin insiders, including government ministers, who were being included on a list for possible sanctions, though it was also announced that no sanctions would be put in place pending further ongoing review of the behavior of those individuals under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.

The so-called "Kremlin List" was clearly designed to put pressure on the inner circle of the Russian government as many of those named have major business ties with the United States and Western Europe that could be severely damaged through sanctions. The intention may have been to encourage those individuals to lessen their support for President Vladimir Putin in the upcoming Russian national elections on March 18.

The Kremlin List has significantly impacted internal Russian politics ahead of a major election and therefore could be seen as the U.S.'s own attempt at election-meddling. It comes on top of a British government claim that Moscow intends to rip British "infrastructure apart, actually cause thousands and thousands and thousands of deaths," and create "total chaos within the country," as well as a U.S. Senate report that alleges a two decade-long assault by Putin "on democratic institutions, universal values, and the rule of law across Europe and in his own country."

The second story, which is more bizarre than the first, describes how Congressman Adam Schiff told a University of Pennsylvania audience that Russian-promoted ads during the 2016 election encouraged people to exercise their Second Amendment rights to own guns. Per Schiff, "the Russians would be thrilled if we were doing nothing but killing each other very day, and sadly we are." So now the Russians, apparently, are responsible not only for Donald Trump getting elected, but also for the U.S. epidemic of gun violence.

Neither Congressman Schiff's meanderings nor the Countering America's

Adversaries Through Sanctions Act serve any conceivable United States national interest – and the Nunes Memo demonstrates, if anything, that the evidence for Russian interference in the U.S. election is elusive at best.

If the alleged Russiagate conspiracy is never actually demonstrated, which looks increasingly likely, it would certainly disappoint the many American talking heads and media “experts” who have been building careers off of bashing Moscow 24/7, but it might also provide a window for the White House to fulfill its electoral promise to fix the Russia relationship.

Philip Giraldi, a former CIA officer, is executive director of the Council for the National Interest. [This article originally appeared at [Strategic Culture](#). Reprinted with permission.]

Understanding Russia, Un-Demonizing Putin

Since Vladimir Putin became president of Russia in 2000, there has been a steady barrage of negative press and hostility from the West. With Putin up for reelection this year, Sharon Tennison tries to separate fact from fiction.

By Sharon Tennison

Russian President Vladimir Putin obviously has his faults and has made his share of mistakes. Yet, my experiences with him, as well as what I have heard over the years from people I trust — including U.S. officials who have with him worked closely — indicate that Putin is essentially a straightforward, reliable and exceptionally inventive man.

The Russian president is clearly a long-term thinker and planner and has proven to be an excellent analyst and strategist. He is a leader who can quietly work toward his goals under mounds of accusations and myths that have been steadily leveled at him since he became the Russian Federation’s second president.

I’ve stood by silently watching the demonization of Putin grow since it began in the early 2000s — I pondered my thoughts and concerns, and included them in a book published in 2011.

Like others who have had direct experience with this little-understood figure, I’ve tried to no avail to avoid being labeled a “Putin apologist.” If one is even neutral about him, they are called “soft on Putin” by pundits and average

citizens who get their news from CNN, Fox and MSNBC.

I don't pretend to be an expert, just an NGO program developer who has lived in Russia and the Soviet Union for the past 30 years. But during this time, I have had far more direct, on-the-ground contact with Russians of all stripes across 11 time zones than any of the Western reporters or for that matter any of Washington's officials.

Understanding Differences

I've been in country long enough to reflect deeply on Russian history and culture, to study their psychology and conditioning, and to understand the marked differences between American and Russian mentalities which so complicate our political relations with their leaders.

As with personalities in a family or a civic club or in a city hall, it takes understanding and compromise to be able to create workable relationships when basic conditionings are different. Washington has been notoriously disinterested in understanding these differences and attempting to meet Russia halfway.

In addition to my personal experience with Putin, I've had discussions with numerous U.S. officials and American businessmen who have had years of experience working with him — I believe it is safe to say that none would describe him as "brutal" or "thuggish," or the other slanderous terms used to describe him in Western media.

I met Putin years before he ever dreamed of being president of Russia, as did many of us working in St. Petersburg during the 1990s. Since the anti-Putin vilification started, I've become nearly obsessed with understanding his character. I think I've read every major speech he has given (including the full texts of his annual hours-long telephone "talk-ins" with Russian citizens).

I've been trying to ascertain whether he has changed for the worse since being elevated to the presidency, or whether he is a straight character cast into a role of villain that he never anticipated — and is using sheer wits to try to do the best he can to deal with Washington under extremely difficult circumstances.

If the latter is the case, and I think it is, he should get high marks for his performance over the past 14 years. It was no accident that Forbes declared him the World's Most Powerful person of 2013, replacing Barack Obama who held the title in 2012. The following is my one personal experience with Putin.

The year was 1992, two years after the implosion of communism. The place was St. Petersburg.

Meeting Putin

For years I had been creating programs to open up relations between the U.S. and USSR, and hopefully to help Soviet people to get beyond their entrenched top-down mentalities. A new program possibility emerged in my head. Since I expected it might require a signature from the Marienskii City Hall, an appointment was made.

My friend Volodya Shestakov and I showed up at a side door entrance to the Marienskii building. We found ourselves in a small, dull brown office, facing a rather trim nondescript man in a brown suit.

He inquired about my reason for coming in. After scanning the proposal I provided he began asking intelligent questions. After each of my answers, he asked the next relevant question.

I became aware that this interviewer was different than other Soviet bureaucrats who always seemed to fall into chummy conversations with foreigners with hopes of obtaining bribes in exchange for the Americans' requests.

This bureaucrat was open, inquiring, and impersonal in demeanor. After more than an hour of careful questions and answers, he quietly explained that he had tried hard to determine if the proposal was legal, then said that unfortunately at the time it was not. A few good words about the proposal were uttered. That was all. He politely showed us to the door.

Out on the sidewalk, I said to my colleague, "Volodya, this is the first time we have ever dealt with a Soviet bureaucrat who didn't ask us for a trip to the U.S. or something valuable!"

I remember looking at his business card in the sunlight — it read Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

An Unexpected Briefing

Two years later, in 1994, U.S. Consul General Jack Gosnell put in an SOS call to me in St. Petersburg. He had 14 Congress members and the new American Ambassador to Russia, Thomas Pickering, coming to St. Petersburg in the next three days. He needed immediate help.

I scurried over to the Consulate and learned that Gosnell intended me to brief this auspicious delegation and the incoming ambassador.

I was stunned but he insisted. They were coming from Moscow and were furious about how U.S. funding was being wasted there. Gosnell wanted them to hear the "good news" about my NGO — the Center for Citizen Initiatives — and its

programs which were showing fine results. In the next 24 hours Gosnell and I also set up “home” meetings in a dozen Russian entrepreneurs’ small apartments for the arriving dignitaries (St. Petersburg State Department people were aghast, since it had never been done before, but Gosnell overruled).

Only later in 2000, did I learn of Gosnell’s former three-year experience with Vladimir Putin in the 1990s while the latter was running the city for Mayor Sobchak. More on this further down.

December 31, 1999

At the turn of the millennium, with no warning, President Boris Yeltsin made the announcement to the world that from the next day forward he was vacating his office and leaving Russia in the hands of an unknown Vladimir Putin.

On hearing the news, I thought surely not the man I remembered — he could never lead Russia, I thought. The next day a NYT article included a photo.

Yes, it was the same Putin I’d met years ago! I was shocked and dismayed, telling friends, “This is a disaster for Russia, I’ve spent time with this guy, he is too introverted and too intelligent — he will never be able to relate to Russia’s masses.”

Further, I lamented: “For Russia to get up off of its knees, two things must happen: 1) The arrogant young oligarchs have to be removed by force from the Kremlin, and 2) A way must be found to remove the regional bosses (governors) from their fiefdoms across Russia’s 89 regions.”

It was clear to me that the man in the brown suit would never have the instincts or guts to tackle Russia’s overriding twin challenges.

Oligarchs on Edge

Almost immediately Putin began putting Russia’s oligarchs on edge. In February 2000 a question about the oligarchs came up; he clarified with a question and his answer: What should the relationship be with the so-called oligarchs? The same as anyone else. The same as the owner of a small bakery or a shoe repair shop.

This was the first signal that the tycoons would no longer be able to flaunt government regulations or count on special access in the Kremlin. It also made the West’s capitalists nervous.

After all, these oligarchs were wealthy untouchable businessmen — good capitalists, never mind that they got their enterprises illegally and were putting their profits in offshore banks.

Four months later Putin called a meeting with the oligarchs and proposed a deal: They could keep their illegally acquired wealth-producing Soviet enterprises and they would not be nationalized *if* taxes were paid on their revenues and if they personally stayed out of politics.

This was the first of Putin's "elegant solutions" to the near-impossible challenges facing the new Russia. But the deal also put Putin in crosshairs with U.S. media and officials who then began to champion the oligarchs, particularly Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

The latter became highly political, didn't pay taxes, and prior to being apprehended and jailed was in the process of selling a major portion of Russia's largest private oil company, Yukos Oil, to Exxon Mobil. Unfortunately, to U.S. media and governing structures, Khodorkovsky became a martyr (and remains so up to today).

Yeltsin's Criminals

In March 2000 I arrived in St. Petersburg. A Russian friend (a psychologist) since 1983 came for our usual visit. My first question was, "Lena what do you think about your new president?" She laughed and retorted, "Volodya! I went to school with him!"

She began to describe Putin as a quiet youngster, poor, fond of martial arts, who stood up for kids being bullied on the playgrounds. She remembered him as a patriotic youth who applied for the KGB prematurely after graduating secondary school (they sent him away and told him to get an education).

He went to law school, later reapplied and was accepted. I must have grimaced at this, because Lena said: "Sharon in those days we all admired the KGB and believed that those who worked there were patriots and were keeping the country safe. We thought it was natural for Volodya to choose this career."

My next question was: "What do you think he will do with Yeltsin's criminals in the Kremlin?"

Putting on her psychologist hat, she contemplated the question and replied that if left to his normal behaviors, Putin would watch them for a while to be sure what was going on, then he would likely throw up some flares to let them know that he was watching. If they didn't respond, he would address them personally, and if the behaviors still didn't change, some would probably spend time in prison.

I congratulated her via email when her predictions began to pan out in real time.

Through the 2000s

Into Putin's first year as Russia's president, U.S. officials seemed to suspect that he would be antithetical to America's interests — his every move was called into question in American media. I couldn't understand why and was chronicling these developments on my computer and newsletters.

During the same period, St. Petersburg's many CCI alumni were being interviewed to determine how the Production Enhancement Program business training program was working and how we could make the U.S. experience more valuable for their new small businesses. Most believed that the program had been enormously important, even life changing. Lastly, each was asked: "So what do you think of your new president?"

None responded negatively, even though at that time entrepreneurs hated Russia's bureaucrats. Most answered similarly, "Putin registered my business a few years ago."

Next question: "So, how much did it cost you?"

To a person they replied, "Putin didn't charge anything." One said that they had gone to Putin's desk because the others providing registrations at the Marienskii were getting "rich on their seats." In other words, Putin had been earning a reputation for honesty and fair-dealing.

U.S.-Russian Relations

The U.S. Consul General, Jack Gosnell, had a close relationship with Putin when he was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg. The two of them worked closely to create joint ventures and other ways to promote relations between the two countries. Gosnell related that Putin was always straightforward, courteous and helpful.

When Putin's wife, Ludmila, was in a severe auto accident, Gosnell took the liberty to arrange hospitalization and airline travel for her to get medical care in Finland. When Gosnell told Putin, he reported that the latter was overcome by the generous offer, but ended saying that he couldn't accept this favor, that Ludmila would have to recover in a Russian hospital.

She did — although medical care in Russia was notoriously bad in the 1990s.

A senior officer at the Center for Strategic and International Studies whom I was friends with in the 2000s worked closely with Putin on a number of joint ventures during the 1990s. He reported that he had no dealings with Putin that were questionable, that he respected him and believed he was getting an undeserved dour reputation from U.S. media.

As a matter of fact, he closed the door at CSIS when we started talking about Putin. I guessed his comments wouldn't be acceptable if others were listening.

Another former U.S. official also reported working closely with Putin, saying there was never any hint of bribery, pressuring, nothing but respectable behaviors and helpfulness.

I had two encounters in 2013 with State Department officials regarding Putin. At the first one, I felt free to ask the question I had previously yearned to get answered: When did Putin become unacceptable to Washington officials and why?

Without hesitation the answer came back: The "knives were drawn," I was told, as soon as it was announced that Putin would be the next president. From what I was told, it seemed that his previous status as a KGB officer had something to do with it.

When I offered that Bush-41 had previously led the CIA, the reply was that Bush was "our guy," so this made no difference.

The second encounter was a former State Department official with whom I had participated in a radio interview on Russia. Afterward while we were chatting, I remarked, "You might be interested to know that I've collected experiences of Putin from numerous people, some over a period of years, and they all say they had no negative experiences with Putin and there was no evidence of taking bribes."

He firmly replied: "No one has ever been able to come up with a bribery charge against Putin."

Demonization and Reality

From 2001 until today, I've watched the U.S. media negatively portray Putin, comparing him to Hitler, and making accusations against him of ordering assassinations and poisonings. Yet no one has come up with any concrete evidence for these allegations.

During this period, 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 in place. Schools and hospitals began improving. Small businesses were growing, agriculture was showing improvement, and stores were becoming stocked with food.

Alcohol controls were strengthened, smoking was banned from buildings, and life expectancy began increasing. 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.

In addition to St. Petersburg and Moscow, in September 2013 I traveled out to the Ural Mountains, spent time in Ekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk and Perm. We traveled between cities via autos and rail — the fields and forests look healthy, small towns sport new paint and construction. Today's Russians look much like Americans — which makes sense considering we get the same clothing from China.

Old concrete Khrushchev block houses are giving way to new multi-story private residential complexes, which are lovely. High-rise business centers, fine hotels and great restaurants are now commonplace — and ordinary Russians frequent these places. Two- and three-story private homes rim these Russian cities far from Moscow.

We visited new museums, municipal buildings and huge supermarkets. Streets are in good condition, highways are newly renovated and well-marked now, and service stations look like those dotting American highways. In January 2014 I went to Novosibirsk out in Siberia where similar new construction was noted. Streets were kept navigable with constant snowplowing, modern lighting kept the city bright all night, lots of new traffic lights (with seconds counting down to light change) have appeared.

It is astounding to me how much progress Russia had made in the past 14 years since an unknown man with no experience walked into Russia's presidency and took over a country that was flat on its belly.

Understanding the Misunderstanding

So why do our leaders and media demean and demonize Putin and Russia? To paraphrase Shakespeare, is it a case of protesting too much?

Psychologists tell us that people often project on to others what they don't want to face in themselves. Others carry our "shadow" when we refuse to own it. We confer on others the very traits that we are horrified to acknowledge in ourselves.

Could this apply to nations as well? Is this why we constantly find fault with Putin and Russia?

Could it be that we project on to Putin the sins of ourselves and our leaders?

Could it be that we condemn Russia's corruption in order to ignore the

corruption within our corporate world?

Could it be that we condemn their human rights and LGBT issues, not facing the fact that we haven't resolved our own?

Could it be that we accuse Russia of "reconstituting the USSR" because of what we do to remain the world's "hegemon"?

Could it be that we project nationalist behaviors on Russia, because that is what we have become and we don't want to face it?

Could it be that we project warmongering off on Russia, because of what we have done over the past several administrations?

Could we be accusing Russia of election-meddling because we do this ourselves?

Whether we can answer these questions with any certainty, one thing I am quite sure of is that 99% of those who excoriate Putin in mainstream media have had no personal contact with him at all. They write articles on hearsay, rumors and fabrication, or they read scripts others have written on their tele-prompters. This is how our nation gets its "news," such as it is.

There is a well-known code of ethics worth bearing in mind: Is it the Truth; Is it Fair; Does it build Friendship and Goodwill; and Will it be Beneficial for All Concerned?

It seems to me that if our nation's leaders would commit to using these four principles in international relations, the world would operate in a completely different manner, and human beings across this planet would live in better conditions than they do today.

Sharon Tennison ran a successful NGO in Russia funded by philanthropists, American foundations, USAID and Department of State, designing new programs and refining old ones, and evaluating Russian delegates' U.S. experiences for over 20 years. She adapted the Marshall Plan Tours from the 40s and 50s, and created the Production Enhancement Program (PEP) for Russian entrepreneurs, the largest ever business training program between the U.S. and Russia. Running several large programs concurrently during the 90s and 2000s, funding disappeared shortly after the 2008 financial crisis set in. Tennison still runs an orphanage program in Russia, is President and Founder, Center for Citizen Initiatives, a member of Rotary Club of Palo Alto, California, and author of *The Power of Impossible Ideas: Ordinary Citizens' Extraordinary Efforts to Avert International Crises*. The author can be contacted at sharon@ccisf.org.

Do We Really Want Nuclear War with Russia?

From the Archive: With Moscow saying that U.S. proposals in its new Nuclear Posture Review to develop “tactical” nukes are “confrontational” and “anti-Russian,” we republish a 2016 article by Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry (first published on Oct. 3, 2016)

Through an endless barrage of ugly propaganda, the U.S. government and the mainstream American press have put the world on course for a potential nuclear showdown with Russia, an existential risk that has been undertaken cavalierly amid bizarre expressions of self-righteousness from Western institutions.

This extraordinarily dangerous moment reflects the insistence of the Establishment in Washington that it should continue to rule the world and that it will not broach the possibility of other nations asserting their own national interests even in their own neighborhoods.

Rather than adjust to a new multi-polar world, the powers-that-be in Washington have deployed a vast array of propaganda assets that are financed or otherwise encouraged to escalate an information war so aggressively that Russia is reading this onslaught of insults as the conditioning of the Western populations for a world war.

While that may not be the intention of President Obama, who in his recent United Nations address acknowledged the risks from imposing uni-polar order on the world, a powerful bureaucratic machinery is in place to advance U.S. propaganda goals. It is operating on a crazed auto-pilot hurtling toward destruction but beyond anyone’s ability to turn it off.

This machinery consists not just of outlets and activists funded by U.S. tax dollars via the National Endowment for Democracy or the U.S. Agency for International Development or NATO’s Strategic Communications Command, but like-minded “human rights” entities paid for by billionaire currency speculator George Soros or controlled by neoconservative ideologues who now run major U.S. newspapers, such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*.

This propaganda apparatus now has so many specialized features that you get supposedly “progressive” and “anti-war” organizations promoting a major U.S. invasion of Syria under the guise of sweet-sounding policies like “no-fly zones” and “safe zones,” the same euphemisms that were used as the gateway to bloody

“regime change” wars in Iraq and Libya.

There exists what intelligence veterans call a Mighty Wurlitzer, an organ with so many keys and pedals that it’s hard to know where all the sounds come from that make up the powerful harmony, all building to the same crescendo. But that crescendo may now be war with nuclear-armed Russia, which finds in all this demonizing the prelude to either a destabilization campaign aimed at “regime change” in Moscow or outright war.

Yet, the West can’t seem to muster the sanity or the honesty to begin toning down or even showing skepticism toward the escalating charges aimed at Russia. We saw similar patterns in the run-up to war in Iraq in 2002-2003 and in justifying the ouster, torture and murder of Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

Western propaganda also has enveloped the conflict in Syria to such an extent that the American people don’t understand that the U.S. government and its regional “allies” have been supporting and arming jihadist groups fighting under the command of Al Qaeda and even the Islamic State. The propaganda has focused on demonizing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while downplaying or ignoring the real nature of the “moderate” opposition.

Taking Aim at Putin

In many ways, the Western insistence on “regime change” in Syria ties in directly to the extraordinary escalation of that strategy to seek “regime change” in Russia. In August-September 2013, America’s neocons and liberal war hawks were salivating over the prospect of a U.S. military bombing campaign to devastate Assad’s army as punishment for his alleged role in a sarin gas attack outside Damascus.

Although the intelligence was weak regarding Assad’s “guilt” – and subsequent evidence has pointed to a likely provocation by radical jihadists using home-made sarin and a jerry-rigged rocket – Official Washington was rubbing its hands at the prospect of a retaliatory bombing operation that would punish Assad and advance the cause of “regime change.”

At the last minute, however, President Obama listened to the doubts from his intelligence advisers and rejected what he later called the Washington “playbook” of a military response to a complex problem. To the annoyance of Washington insiders, Obama then collaborated with President Putin in a diplomatic settlement in which Syria surrendered all its chemical weapons while still denying any role in the sarin attack. Obama was accused of weakness for not “enforcing his red line” against chemical weapons use.

The despair over Obama’s failure to bomb the Syrian government and open the path

for a long-desired “regime change” in Damascus led to a search for other villains, the most obvious one being Putin, who then became the focus of neocon determination to make him share their pain and disappointment.

National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman took to the op-ed page of *The Washington Post* in late September 2013 to declare that Ukraine was now “the biggest prize” and represented an important interim step toward eventually toppling Putin in Russia.

Gershman, who is essentially a neocon paymaster dispensing \$100 million a year in U.S. taxpayers’ money to activists, journalists and various other operatives, wrote: “Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself.”

Within weeks, U.S. neocons – including Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland and Sen. John McCain – were encouraging right-wing Ukrainian nationalists to overthrow Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovich, a coup accomplished on Feb. 22, 2014, touching off a civil war between Ukraine’s west and east.

As part of that Western propaganda barrage, the Ukraine coup ousting the elected president was hailed as a victory for “democracy” and Yanukovich’s supporters in the south and east who resisted this imposition of illegitimate authority in Kiev became the target of a U.S.-backed “Anti-Terrorism Operation” or ATO.

Led by *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, the Western media fell in line behind the preferred narrative that there was “no coup,” that there were “no neo-Nazis” spearheading the non-coup (or maybe just a few), that the “Heavenly Hundred” who died in the putsch against Yanukovich had given their lives for Ukraine’s “freedom” even though some of the “heavenly” inconveniently were neo-Nazi street fighters, part of a paramilitary force that had killed some 16 police officers.

Killing ‘Terrorists’

Given the West’s pro-coup propaganda themes, it became necessary to justify the thousands of eastern Ukrainians slaughtered in the ATO as the killing of “terrorists” or Russian “stooges,” getting what they deserved. The 96 percent vote in Crimea’s referendum to reunify with Russia had to be a “sham” since the West’s narrative held that the Ukrainian people were thrilled with the putsch, so the Crimeans must have voted that way at Russian gunpoint.

The explanation of Crimea’s secession from Ukraine was that Russia “invaded” and “annexed” Crimea although there were no images of an invasion (no tanks crossing Crimea’s borders, no amphibious landings, no paratroopers descending from the

sky – because Russian troops were already in Crimea as part of a basing agreement and helped protect Crimea’s inhabitants so they could hold their vote which did represent their desires).

Because the Western propaganda insisted that the new authorities in Kiev were wearing white hats, the Russians had to be fitted with black hats. Every bad thing that happened was automatically Putin’s fault. So, when Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, the West’s propaganda machinery whirred into action, blaming Russia for supposedly giving the ethnic Russian rebels powerful Buk anti-aircraft missiles.

The propaganda momentum was so strong by then that there was no Western support for Russia’s request for a United Nations investigation. Instead the inquiry was largely turned over to the torture-implicated Ukrainian intelligence service, the SBU, upon which the Dutch and Australians, the other two principal members, became increasingly dependent (by their own admissions). Belgium and Malaysia played lesser roles.

The Joint Investigation Committee (JIT) considered no serious alternatives to the Russians and the rebels being responsible. For instance, when the JIT released its “report” on Sept. 28, 2016, there was no explanation offered for why Dutch intelligence (i.e. NATO intelligence) had concluded that the only missile systems in eastern Ukraine on July 17, 2014, capable of shooting down MH-17 were controlled by the Ukrainian military. The JIT “report” was silent about where those Ukrainian Buk missile systems were at the time of the shoot-down.

It’s also a bit of a misnomer to describe the JIT’s findings as a “report” since they were really expressed in a series of videos featuring computer-generated graphics supposedly showing a Russian Buk crew driving around Ukraine, mixed in with a few photos from social media of a Buk convoy.

Key to the JIT’s findings were phone intercepts provided by the SBU and assembled to reinforce the impression of Russian guilt. The problem, however, was that except for one intercept in which someone said he’d like to have Buks, the word “Buk” is not mentioned; nor the word “missiles”; nor the word “aircraft”; nor any discussion about shooting down a plane. That was all supposition with an authoritative narrator filling in the gaps.

Ignoring Contrary Evidence

The JIT also ignored evidence that contradicted its conclusions, such as other intercepts reporting that a Ukrainian convoy had penetrated close to the eastern city of Luhansk. The significance of that revelation is that it confirms a point

that has been largely ignored, that the Ukrainian military could move almost at will across “rebel-controlled territory.” The notion that the Ukrainian civil war was like World War I with fixed trench lines was simply a fallacy.

The JIT also had to impose a bizarre route for the Russian Buk battery to follow on its way to the supposed firing location south of the remote eastern town of Snizhne. Because the “social media” photos show the Buk convoy heading east toward Russia, not west from Russia, the JIT had to map out a journey that ignored a simple, direct and discreet route from the Russian border to Snizhne in favor of a trip more than twice as long roaming around eastern Ukraine all the way to Donetsk before turning eastward past a number of heavily populated areas where the Buk convoy, supposedly on a highly secret mission, could be photographed.

The alleged firing location also conflicts with the alleged reason for the Russians taking the extraordinary risk of introducing a Buk system – that it was needed to defend rebel soldiers then fighting mostly in the north against Ukrainian troops and aircraft. For that purpose, the positioning of a Buk battery far to the southeast makes little sense, nor does the decision for a Russian Buk crew to shoot down a commercial airliner flying at 33,000 feet.

JIT’s account of the post-crash exfiltration of the Buk convoy back to Russia also is curious, since again the shortest, easiest and least populated route was ignored in favor of one that went far to the north past Luhansk, the alleged site of the supposed “getaway” video (although the supposed location of the “getaway” video was misplaced by Western media groups trying to pin the blame on Russia).

The confirmed parts of the Buk convoy’s route, i.e., along highways east of Donetsk, would fit better with a scenario that, I’m told, received serious consideration from U.S. intelligence analysts, that a Ukrainian Buk system under the control of a rogue military unit loyal to a fiercely anti-Putin oligarch traveled east into what was considered “rebel-controlled territory” to fire on what was hoped to be Putin’s official plane returning from a state visit to South America, i.e. to kill Putin.

A source briefed by these analysts said the missile was fired despite the unit’s doubt that the plane was Putin’s. Although it’s unclear to me exactly what the U.S. intelligence consensus ultimately turned out to be on MH-17 (since I have been refused official updates), there would be logic in a Ukrainian hardliner staging such an audacious missile attack deep inside “rebel territory,” since any assassination of Putin would have to be explained as an accidental attack by his own allies, i.e., the ultimate case of Putin being hoisted on his own petard.

To evaluate which scenario makes more sense – that the Russians dispatched a Buk missile battery on a wild ride across eastern Ukraine or that a Ukrainian Buk battery penetrated into supposedly rebel-controlled territory with the intent of attacking a civilian plane (although not MH-17) – it would be crucial to have an explanation of where the Ukrainian Buk batteries were located on July 17, 2014.

Silence on Dutch Intelligence

Some of the Russia-did-it crowd have dismissed claims that Ukrainian Buk systems were in the area as Russian disinformation, but their presence was confirmed by a report from the Dutch intelligence service, MIVD, relying on NATO information to explain why commercial airliners were still being allowed over the war zone.

The MIVD's explanation was that the only anti-aircraft missiles that could hit a plane at 33,000 feet were controlled by Ukraine, which was presumed to have no interest in attacking commercial aircraft, and that the rebels lacked any missile system that could reach that high. Clearly, there was an intelligence failure because either some Ukrainian Buk operators did have an intent to strike a civilian plane or the rebels did have a Buk system in the area.

If the JIT were operating objectively, it would have included something about this intelligence failure, either by showing that it had investigated the possibility that Ukrainian Buk missiles were used by a rogue unit or explaining how Western intelligence could have missed Russia's introduction of a Buk system into eastern Ukraine.

Instead, there was just this video that includes cryptic phone intercepts, assertions about unnamed witnesses and computer-generated graphics "showing" the movement of a Russian Buk convoy along darkened roads in Ukraine.

Despite the unusual nature of this "indictment," it was widely accepted in Western media as the final proof of Russian perfidy. The evidence was called "overwhelming" and "conclusive."

Rather than treating the video report as a prosecutor's brief – a set of allegations yet to be proved – Western journalists accepted it as flat fact, much as they did Secretary of State Colin Powell's similar presentation on Feb. 5, 2003, "proving" that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction. (Powell also used computer-generated images – of Iraq's "mobile chemical weapons labs" that, in reality, didn't exist.)

The day after the JIT video report was issued, The New York Times' lead editorial was headlined, "Mr. Putin's Outlaw State." It read:

"President Vladimir Putin is fast turning Russia into an outlaw nation. As one

of five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, his country shares a special responsibility to uphold international law. Yet, his behavior in Ukraine and Syria violates not only the rules intended to promote peace instead of conflict, but also common human decency.

“This bitter truth was driven home twice on Wednesday [Sept. 28]. An investigative team led by the Netherlands concluded that the surface-to-air missile system that shot down a Malaysia Airlines plane over Ukraine in July 2014, killing 298 on board, was sent from Russia to Russian-backed separatists and returned to Russia the same night. ...

“Russia has tried hard to pin the blame for the airline crash on Ukraine. But the new report, produced by prosecutors from the Netherlands, Australia, Belgium, Malaysia and Ukraine, confirms earlier findings. It uses strict standards of evidence and meticulously documents not only the deployment of the Russian missile system that caused the disaster but also Moscow’s continuing cover-up. ...

“President Obama has long refused to approve direct military intervention in Syria. And Mr. Putin may be assuming that Mr. Obama is unlikely to confront Russia in his final months and with an American election season in full swing. But with the rebel stronghold in Aleppo under threat of falling to the government, administration officials said that such a response is again under consideration.

“Mr. Putin fancies himself a man on a mission to restore Russia to greatness. Russia could indeed be a great force for good. Yet his unconscionable behavior – butchering civilians in Syria and Ukraine, annexing Crimea, computer-hacking American government agencies, crushing dissent at home – suggests that the furthest thing from his mind is becoming a constructive partner in the search for peace.”

Rich Irony

Granted, there is some rich irony in a major U.S. newspaper, which helped justify illegal aggression against Iraq with false reporting about Iraq buying aluminum tubes for nuclear centrifuges, pontificating about international law.

Indeed, the very idea that any serious person in the United States would lecture other countries about international law would be laughable if the hypocrisy were not delivered in such a serious set of circumstances. For decades now, the United States has been a law unto itself, deciding which countries should be bombed and who should be assassinated.

President Obama himself has acknowledged authorizing military strikes in seven

countries during his presidency and many of those attacks were done outside international law. Indeed, the Times editorial appears to urge Obama to launch illegal military strikes against the Syrian government and, not surprisingly, doesn't mention the U.S. airstrike that killed some 62 Syrian government soldiers just last month, delivering a death blow to the partial ceasefire.

Instead, you get a medley of the Times' greatest anti-Russian propaganda hits while ignoring the U.S. role in destabilizing and overthrowing Ukraine's elected government in favor of a harshly anti-Russian nationalist regime that then began slaughtering thousands of ethnic Russians who resisted the coup.

Nor does the Times mention that Russia is operating inside Syria by invitation of the sovereign government, while the U.S. has no such authority. And the Times leaves out how the U.S. government and its allies have covertly armed and funded jihadist rebels who have inflicted many of the hundreds of thousands of dead in Syria. Not everyone, including Syrian soldiers, was killed by Assad and the Russians, although that's the impression the Times leaves.

A more nuanced account would reflect this murky reality in which sophisticated U.S. weapons, such as TOW missiles, have ended up in the possession of Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate and its jihadist allies. It would acknowledge that many sides are at fault for these tragedies in Syria and Ukraine – not to mention all the bloodshed that has followed the U.S.-led and U.S.-enabled wars that have torn apart the Middle East over the past decade and a half.

The Times might also admit that Putin was helpful in resolving the 2013 sarin crisis in Syria and achieving a breakthrough on the Iran nuclear talks in 2014. But that would not fit the propaganda need to demonize Putin and ready the American people for another, even more terrifying "regime change," this time in Moscow.

What we can now expect are a series of legal actions brought against Russia in connection with the MH-17 case and other controversies. The goal will be to further demonize Putin and to destabilize Russia, a process already underway with economic sanctions that have helped throw Russia's economy into recession.

The neocon plan is to ratchet up tensions and pain so Putin's elected government will somehow collapse with the neocons hoping that some U.S. lackey will take over and allow another round of "shock therapy," i.e. the plunder of Russia's resources to the benefit of a few favored oligarchs and their American consultants.

However, given the dreadful experience that the average Russian faced from the earlier round of "shock therapy" in the 1990s – including a stunning decline in

life expectancy – the more likely outcome from even a successful neocon scheme of “regime change” would be the emergence of a much more hard-line Russian nationalist than Putin.

Whereas Putin is a calculating and rational leader, the guy who follows him might well be an ideologue ready to use nuclear weapons to protect Mother Russia’s honor. After all, it’s not as if one of these neocon “regime change” calculations has ever gone wrong before.

Yet, whichever way things go, Official Washington – and its complicit mainstream media – now appear determined to push Russia into a corner with military encroachments from NATO on Russia’s borders and with criminal accusations before biased international “investigations.” Any misstep in this dangerous game could quickly end life as we know it.

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