

Media Bias: Parroting a “New Cold War” which Threatens America

Media Whoop Up Stampede To Cold War, Hot War, Whatever

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Crimea may be bigger than an archduke, but not more important

If American media seem filled these days with bellicose, jingoistic, uniform perspectives on a new Cold War, that’s probably because so many news outlets can’t seem to help themselves when it comes to framing new events in the tired terms of the last generation’s ingrained propaganda. At a time that needs fresh contemplation, even people like Amy Goodman on [Democracy NOW](#) are talking about recent events in and around Ukraine as having “sparked the worst East-West crisis since the end of the Cold War” or words to more extreme effect.

This construct (a no longer relevant “East-West” divide) reflects an unreflective, outdated group think. This approach is clearly wrong about the “worst crisis,” unless one ignores various wars and terrorist attacks and drone strikes of recent years. A difference between Iraq and Crimea is one of scale, certainly, but also of response, as the rest of the world accepted the American view of Iraq’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (just as they passively accept the American view of Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen, Venezuela, and Honduras, as well as all those other places where might makes right irrelevant).

Any of those other countries might well argue that the “worst crisis” since the end of the Cold War was actually any of the wars visited on them and still not over. This comparison is not made in the sealed mind room of the New Cold Warriors, where the non-violent, legally ambiguous and possibly welcome occupation of Crimea is seen as so much worse than tens of thousands of dead Iraqis (or pick your own odious comparison). It is an expression of mental sterility that will do most of us no good.

The endlessly parroted mantra of a new Cold War is worse than merely mindless. Such irresponsible repetitive chatter also functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy by heightening a few fairly insignificant events (and omitting others) until the tunnel vision focus on only a part of the whole becomes widely perceived as the totality of a real crisis and reality is discredited. Can anyone say [Archduke Franz Ferdinand](#), 1914?

Intellectual dishonesty, as illustrated by NBC News

[NBC News](#), in its “First Read feature on March 24, 2014, provided what could some day be a textbook example of how media bias works to make war more thinkable, by emphasizing conflict and ignoring cooperation as appropriate responses to difficult questions (which media also tend to oversimplify). Covering the White House European trip, NBC reporters picked up on an interview President Obama did with a newspaper in the Netherlands, [de](#)

[Volkskrant](#), which submitted eight questions in advance for the President to answer in writing. The President answered five (relating to Ukraine, the European Union, nuclear weapons, Iran, and the Mideast).

Without describing (or linking to) those five questions, or their answers, the NBC reporters instead commented: “However, the paper also noted the three questions he did NOT answer. And all of them were MUCH trickier to answer....”

The THREE unanswered questions were the best three questions, and they’re the ones we’re looking forward to others asking the president later this week.”

This approach by NBC deprives the reader of the opportunity to compare, contrast, and make an independent judgment on all eight questions and answers. Instead, NBC guides its audience to the assumption that the real news is actually NBC’s editorial point of view (although that’s not said directly). This technique of asking editorially charged questions is common in American “journalism” and helps “news” organizations shape a story to whatever pre-determined perspective might be desired (it’s rarely clear who desires it).

Here, NBC provides an excellent exercise for analyzing fundamentally dishonest questions (questions that, in and of themselves, raise the question of the questioner’s agenda). NBC’s choice of the “three best questions” comes out of an apparent mindset that represents current conventional wisdom (which, by definition, demands inquiry by those who distrust any herd instinct). Here are the three questions the President left unanswered, and some of the reasons they may not deserve an answer:

“1. How do you fight the perspective that America withdraws from the world and is no longer feared by his [sic] opponents?”

What does the questioner mean by “the perspective”? Whose perspective? The questioner’s perspective? The perspective for a New American Century? Some hypothetical perspective? Is it anyone’s perspective at all? Why should such a question even be considered seriously without some clarity on the presumed “perspective”? Without context, it is not a serious question.

The first hidden assumption here is that America needs to “fight,” that America should fight, that America should start by fighting a “perspective,” but get into a real fight soon enough. The point of the question is to get into a fight, not to consider whether there’s anything worth fighting about.

Another hidden assumption here is that America has, in fact, withdrawn from the world. That hidden assumption is blatantly false, as those who engineered the February coup in Kiev are well aware. Close American involvement in the unconstitutional overthrow of an elected, Russian-leaning government and its replacement with a Western-leaning junta is a reality that rather blurs the picture of exceptional American purity and persistent Russian perfidy.

So one partial answer to the question would correctly be: I don’t “fight the perspective that America withdraws from the world,” because that perspective is disconnected from reality. A more expansive answer might mention that the “perspective” is a rightwing talking point that would lead logically to the experience of Iraq-in-Ukraine, only much messier.

Rhetorically, one might add: “withdraws from the world”? Really? You mean the “pivot to Asia,” maybe? Or are you referring to the thousand or so [U.S. military bases](#) in countries

that may have missed our “withdrawal” (Okinawa has perhaps a majority population that would rejoice at any “withdrawal”)? Or maybe you’re relying on the “need” to contain all [those five Russian](#) overseas military bases (in Armenia, Syria, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Transnistria)?

The assumption that there is such a perspective of American withdrawal hides yet another assumption, that any American “withdrawal” from the world would, in and of itself, be a Bad Thing. And that hidden assumption hides yet another: that American imperialism is unquestionably a Good Thing.

Sometimes the invisible hides the imaginary, sometimes the opposite

And then there’s the second half of the question, the assumption that America “is no longer feared by his [sic] opponents.” Again, no evidence is offered or implied for this assumption, which is another New American Century-type rightwing talking point. A more realistic assumption would be that America is feared by everyone to a greater or lesser degree, whether for some act of active destruction (see list above) or some passive act of destruction (such as inaction on climate change that leaves island nations to the mercy of rising sea level).

Another hidden assumption here is that “fear” is a desirable basis for an international relationship, especially with one’s “opponents.” Since fear is a basic tool of the bully, the further assumption here is that it’s good for America to bully any part of the world that opposes it. Fear is also the tool of the colonizer, the slave master, the imperialist, the aggressor. Fear is a tool of direct attack on the sovereignty of others, and opens the way to attacks on their territorial integrity. Fear has its uses, to be sure, and can be effective sometimes, but is it a default value of peacemaking statecraft seeking a stable world of interdependence?

As the United States proceeds with its military build-up in the [Baltic countries, in Poland](#), and in [other places proximate to Russia](#), is there anyone who should not be afraid? Is there anyone who does not understand that [advancing US/NATO](#) forces, by definition, bring the threat of [tactical nuclear weapons](#) that much closer to Moscow, which has [tactical nuclear weapons](#) of its own?

And then there’s the geographically separate Russian [state of Kaliningrad \(formerly Königsberg](#), among many other names), located on the Baltic Sea between Poland and Lithuania (both NATO members). Kaliningrad has a vulnerability similar to that of Crimea and an area about half the size. Ethnically cleansed of its former majority German population in the aftermath of World War II, Kaliningrad’s population of 430,000 is now [predominantly Russian](#). Kaliningrad [may or may not](#) be a base for Russian tactical nuclear weapons.

So who are these “opponents” who are supposed to be afraid of the United States? Who defines them, and how? Does the determination lie with someone in Washington unhappy with the way another country distributes its oil or runs its beach resorts? Does Washington just pick whatever fight amuses it (two decades of encircling Russia with NATO), or does it wait for some actual act of opposition? And who decides what opposition is legitimate (Canadian opposition to American wars once, say, or opposition to U.S. environmental law now)? How dare Russia assert its authority over Crimea, or China assert its rights in the South China Sea?

Framing the question with “opponents” hides the assumption that the world must always be based on competition and hostility. The truth of that assumption is hardly self-evident. But making an assumption of eternal opposition does contribute to a self-fulfilling prophecy that makes any other assumption impossible.

What if the Dutch newspaper had asked a different question, along these lines: How do you fight the perspective that America doesn’t play well with others

and so, instead of cooperating in order to ease tensions over the long term,

quickly resorts to temper tantrums, often violent ones, that do far more

damage than just sitting still and trying to understand?

“2. Sanctions are a slow working medicine which perhaps doesn’t work at all. How do you expect to keep Putin in the meantime in check?”

Here the stated assumption is that sanctions work slowly, if at all, but it is asserted ex cathedra without reference to any specific evidence. However reasonable the assumption is, it carries a hidden assumption that is at best dubious. That assumption, hidden in the word “medicine,” is that sanctions are inherently good and proper instruments of restoring health, rather than tools for exercising control, or means of punishment or destruction. This also assumes that those applying the medicine are all good doctors following the imperative of the Hippocratic Oath – first, do no harm.

Or, as the European Union might put it: if only we could do to Russia what we’ve already imposed on Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Of course those weren’t sanctions, that was austerity, and it was for their own good to protect our good. Are you listening, Ukraine? We want only the best medicine for you!

Another assumption hidden in the way sanctions are defined is that probably the use of stronger medicine will be called for sooner or later – so why aren’t you ready to use force?

The assumption is that if the medicine doesn’t work, or works too slowly, then America should employ sterner measures. And this is another rightwing New American Century talking point, albeit a second tier argument needed only when America has failed to be tough enough in the first place.

Then there’s the assumption that Russian President Vladimir Putin needs to be kept in check. Given the volatility of recent events in Ukraine, there’s good reason to see the Russian occupation of Crimea as an opportunistic tactic in the midst of chaos rather than part off some strategic grand plan for which there is scant evidence. [Those who argue](#) the grand plan idea have to go back to Georgia in 2008 and not much else but the projection of their fears, usually in a context free of uncomfortably contradictory and aggressive behavior by others during the same period.

The assumption that Putin needs to be kept in check becomes plausible thanks to another hidden assumption: that Putin is an evil person motivated by evil intent. This acceptance of the demonization of Putin is the result of great effort over a long time by much of the American media, the job of demonizing Putin abroad made so much easier by the closed media in Russia. Demonization is, by definition a false narrative, but it is accepted more easily when there is no credible counter-narrative. In a sense Putin’s demonization becomes

an East-West collusion that manages to serve the power politics on either side. If, in fact, the truth will set you free, why would any government want that?

The demonization is further a barrier to thinking clearly, by substituting the ad hominem caricature of a cartoon Czar for a rational assessment of the [legitimate interests](#) of the Russian state. Ruthless demonization is what Republicans and their ilk have done to President Obama since 2009, with the same basic intent: to turn a president into a legitimate target, based on a purely emotional appeal that is designed to elicit visceral hatred. Those demonizing either Putin or Obama can not afford to allow fact-based, rational discussion emerge, for fear that the result might turn out be some sort of peaceful settlement.

Perhaps the Dutch newspaper would have served us better by asking something to the effect of: can you apply sanctions with sufficient balance so that they do not become a new provocation to Russia but are still sufficient to keep American war hawks in check? And is that something you actually want to do?

“3. Is it still possible for countries like Ukraine and Georgia to become NATO member? How likely is it that we return to a situation of limited sovereignty for the immediate neighbors of Russia?”

Taking the words at face value, asking about the membership of Ukraine and/or Georgia in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is inherently absurd. These countries are nowhere near the North Atlantic.

In isolation, the question about “possibility” seems to assume that NATO membership for Ukraine or Georgia might be a good thing, and should be open to discussion. But the assumption that such expansion might still be possible is itself inherently threatening to Russian interests. Who benefits from raising the issue again in this new context? Certainly those who prefer to have opponents in the world, and who want to make those opponents afraid, will be happy to press the question of NATO membership ad infinitum.

If the NATO question was intended to be neutral, that neutrality is curdled by the coded message of the second question about “limited sovereignty.” In a stripped down translation, the question amounts to a challenge: President Obama, are you going to allow a new Iron Curtain to come down across Europe?

That question is essentially the same as the initial question about fighting “the perspective that America withdraws.” The argument behind these questions is circular for a reason — because the questioner has already determined the correct answer, regardless of whether that answer is right, wrong, or irrelevant.

No wonder, then, that NBC considers these “the three best questions.”

And no wonder media so often ignore the hidden reality: that questions like these aren’t journalism worthy of the name. These questions are more like Russian dolls, full of hidden assumptions, one within another. Accept the outer doll, you get them all, and the reasoned exchange that never began is already over.

ADDENDUM:

President Obama’s [news conference](#) in The Hague, Netherlands, on March 25, 2014,

provides another real world example of media obtuseness, as argued above. An excerpt from the transcript follows. The questioner is Jonathan Karl of ABC News asking the mindless herd's thoughtless question:

Q Mr. President, thank you. In China, in Syria, in Egypt and now in Russia, we've seen you make strong statements, issue warnings that have been ignored. Are you concerned that America's influence in the world, your influence in the world, is on the decline? And in the light of recent developments, do you think Mitt Romney had a point when he said that Russia is America's biggest geopolitical foe? If not Russia, who?...

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, Jonathan, I think if the premise of the question is that whenever the United States objects to an action and other countries don't immediately do exactly what we want, that that's been the norm, that would pretty much erase most of the 20th century history. I think that there's a distinction between us being very clear about what we think is an appropriate action, what we stand for, what principles we believe in versus what is I guess implied in the question that we should engage in some sort of military action to prevent something....

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