

The Rush to a New Cold War

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A new Cold War has taken shape between nuclear-armed Russia and the United States with very little public debate, just a return to hostile rhetoric and military moves and counter-moves over Ukraine, an issue that journalist Robert Parry has followed over the past year and a half.

Parry, a longtime Washington-based investigative reporter and editor of Consortiumnews.com, was interviewed about the crisis by Dennis J. Bernstein for Pacifica Radio's Flashpoint program.

DB: It looks like the U.S., with Barack Obama leading the charge, has entered what you call "the second cold war." What do you mean by the second cold war?

RP: There has been a sharp increase in tension, obviously, between the United States and Russia. We've seen a very divergent way of looking at the problem. The United States and mainstream media have taken a very propagandist view of what occurred in Ukraine. The Russians have taken a very different view, which, perhaps to our amazement, is more accurate than what the United States is saying.

Because of these two divergent narratives, the countries have essentially plunged back into a cold war, where there's a lot of hostility, threats of military escalations, with the U.S. sending military teams to essentially parade along the western border of Russia. Some of those countries are NATO allies, and others, like Ukraine, may want to become a NATO ally.

So these tensions are building up, that oddly don't have much direct connection to U.S. national interests, but have become a kind of *cause célèbre* in Official Washington where everyone just wants to stand tough against the Russians and bash Putin. It's become almost a self-perpetuating dynamic.

The Russians have taken a very different perspective, which is that the United States is encroaching on its borders and threatening them in a strategic manner. They also look at what happened in Ukraine very differently. They see a U.S.-backed *coup d'état* in February 2014 that ousted an elected president and put in a regime that is very supportive of free market, neo-liberal policies, but also includes very strong right-wing elements, including neo-Nazis and far-right nationalists. A crisis was created and tensions continue to spiral out of control.

DB: Let's talk about the origins of this cold war rhetoric. First, we have Barack Obama leading the charge. He has become a real cold warrior, hasn't he?

RP: He's certainly allowed some of his underlings to use very aggressive rhetoric against the Russians, particularly Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, who led the charge in

supporting the *coup* in Ukraine in early 2014.

DB: When you say *coup*, most people don't know that occurred. Was there a *coup*?

RP: Of course there was. There was an armed uprising that involved some very far right neo-Nazi militias that had been organizing and penetrating into what became the Maidan protests against the decision by the elected President Yanukovich not to go ahead quickly with an association with the European Union. That became increasingly violent; including some mysterious sniper attacks killing police and demonstrators, and getting the two sides to go at each other.

There was a political effort on Feb. 21, 2014, where Yanukovich agreed to reduce his powers and have early elections so he could be elected out of office. It was signed by three European countries to guarantee it. The next day there was a *coup*. These right-wing groups surged forward, seizing buildings, and Yanukovich barely escaped with his life.

Very quickly, despite the very unconstitutional nature of this change of power, the United States and European Union recognized this as legitimate. But it was obviously something the ethnic Russians, especially those in the eastern and southern Ukraine, found objectionable. They were the bases of support for Yanukovich, so they began to rise up, and this *coup d'état* then merged into a civil war.

DB: You have previously said the U.S. played an active role in this "*coup*."

RP: There's no question. The U.S. was supporting, through the National Endowment for Democracy, scores of political organizations that were working to overthrow the elected government. There were other U.S. entities, like USAID, as well as members of the U.S. government. Sen. John McCain went to Kiev, spoke to this very right-wing group, and said the U.S. supports you and what you are doing.

Then there was the famous phone conversation that was intercepted between Assistant Secretary of State Nuland and Ambassador Jeffrey Pyatt where they discussed who was going to take over after the change of power. Nuland put forward that Yatsenyuk "is the guy," who after the *coup* became the prime minister. There were all the markings of a *coup d'état*. More neutral observers, who have looked at this, including the head of the Stratfor think tank (George Friedman), have called it the most obvious *coup* he's ever seen.

That was the reality, but the U.S. news media and U.S. government chose to present it in a very different way. The Yanukovich government just left the scene, or something, is how the New York Times presented it. That wasn't real, but that's how they sold it to the American people.

We have two very distinct ways of looking at this. One is the ethnic Russians of Ukraine who saw their president violently overthrown, and the other is the western Ukrainians, backed by the U.S., and in some degree the European Union, saying they got rid of a corrupt leader, through a revolution, if you will. That became the core problem between the U.S. and Russians. Instead of finding common factual points to agree on, there are these two distinctly different narratives about what went on there.

DB: In Germany, recently, Obama himself carried this forward.

RP: Obama has been all over the map on this. In May, he sent Secretary of State Kerry to meet with President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov in Sochi, Russia. Those meetings, by all accounts, went very well in that Kerry was looking for Russian help on a variety of international problems, including Syria, Libya, the Iranian nuclear talks, and so forth. These are areas where Putin has been very helpful in the past in terms of U.S. policy. There was a general meeting of the minds, it seemed.

But after Kerry returned, Obama seemed to swing back, to go more with his hard-liners. That was followed by the recent G7 Summit in Bavaria, at which Obama pushed for a continuation of economic sanctions against Russia. He continued to blame Russia for all the problems of Ukraine. He pretended that the Russians were the problem for why the Minsk 2 Peace Accord had not been going forward, even though the accord was essentially Putin's idea that he sold to the Germans and the French. It's really the Kiev regime that has tried to derail the Minsk 2 agreement from the very time it was signed.

Yet Obama took aggressive positions in Bavaria, including personal insults directed at Putin. Now we are back into this idea that we must have a confrontation with Russia. We're seeing this play out not just at the government level, but now also at the media level. At the more popular level, the New York Times and other major news organizations essentially are acting as propaganda agents for the U.S. government, by simply conveying whatever the government says as fact, and not something to be checked out.

DB: You are saying this as somebody who is based outside the Beltway, correct?

RP: No, I'm actually inside the Beltway.

DB: Good, I feel better now that you're in there. Where could this kind of policy lead? You've expressed concerns that we are dealing with two major nuclear powers. We have a man in Russia who will not be fooled with public relations, given that he was a master of it as head of the KGB. So where is this going?

RP: It has very dangerous possibilities. One hopes, of course, that cooler heads will prevail. But we see that when people paint themselves into corners, they sometimes don't want to get into the embarrassment of getting themselves out. The more rhetoric and propaganda you throw into this, the harder it is for people to come to some common ground, reach an agreement and work things out.

There's been this idea among the neoconservatives in Washington, for some time now, that the real goal here is to oust Putin. As Carl Gershman, president of the National Endowment for Democracy, said back in 2013, Ukraine is "the biggest prize." But he made clear that it was simply a stepping-stone to removing Putin as the President of Russia, doing some sort of regime change in Moscow.

What the neo-cons often fail to understand, as we've seen very painfully in places like Iraq, is they think things are going to be easy, they can simply put in somebody like Chalabi in Baghdad and everything will work out fine. But that often isn't the way it goes. In the case of Russia, the great danger is that if the U.S. could de-stabilize Russia, somehow create a political crisis there, it's very possible that instead of an easily manipulated person like Yeltsin, there would be a super hard-line nationalist taking over, taking a harder line than Putin. Then you can get into a situation where a nuclear confrontation would become a very real possibility.

To deal with that kind of dangerous reality and be reasonable, the U.S. needs to realize that the ethnic Russians in Ukraine have a legitimate beef, and they are not simply part of a Russian invasion or aggression. Both sides have some argument here. All the truth does not rest in Washington DC and I would argue that less of it rests in Washington DC. If you don't deal with people honestly and straightforwardly, and try to understand their concern, a manageable crisis can turn into one that spins out of control.

DB: I have always thought that to some degree that the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, on foreign policy issues, particularly East and West, have often acted as a wing, an arm, a public relations division of the State Department. Is that getting worse?

RP: Yes, it's been a problem. In 2002 and 2003, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* essentially led the drive for believing that Saddam Hussein had WMDs and the only answer was to invade Iraq. We've seen what that led to. The great irony here is that as much as the Washington press corps pretends it stands for truth and all these good things, there was virtually no accountability assessed upon people who misreported that story.

It's true that there's safety in numbers. All the important journalists got the story wrong and almost none of them were punished. They were allowed to go on, many in the same positions that they held then. Michael Gordon is still the Pentagon correspondent for the *New York Times*. He was one of the co-authors of the famous aluminum tube story, that these tubes being used for nuclear centrifuges, when they weren't fit for that at all. Fred Hiatt, the editorial page editor of the *Washington Post*, said as flat fact that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction back in 2002 and 2003. He's still in the same job.

There's a problem of no accountability, so many of these news organizations go from one catastrophic inability to report honestly about what is going on in the world, to the next. Now they've upped the ante to a possible confrontation between nuclear-armed Russia and nuclear-armed United States. We are now back into the cold war mentality. The *New York Times* had a piece this week essentially suggesting that anybody who doesn't go along with the U.S. version of events must be working for Moscow.

We are starting to see McCarthyism rear its ugly head as well. Once you get into these kinds of propaganda wars, anyone who challenges or questions them has their patriotism questioned. We saw that somewhat in Iraq when people who questioned the WMD story early were called Saddam apologists. Now we're seeing something similar happening. If you point out some of these inconvenient facts that don't make the Kiev regime look too good, you're accused of being a stooge of Moscow.

DB: I am concerned that this kind of policy is going to continue. And it's not Saddam Hussein now, but Vladimir Putin, who has extreme experience, about how to play public relations games. And he has a nuclear arsenal, so it's a whole different game here.

RP: The American propaganda barrage has not at all swayed the Russian people and government. Of course, the U.S. says they are all being propagandized by *Russia Today* and other Russian networks. Frankly, one can argue with some ways some things have been reported by *RT* or other Russian sources, but they have been doing a more accurate, on-the-ground job than the U.S. press corps has been.

You can point to a number of egregious major mistakes made by the major US news organizations. The *New York Times* went along with a bogus photograph from spring 2014

supposedly showing Russian troops in Ukraine. It turned out that some of the photographs were misrepresented and did not show what they were supposed to show. They [the Times writers] were forced to retract that.

You can point to factual errors on both sides, but it's not something where the U.S., as the *New York Times* tries to present it, is perfect and hasn't presented anything improperly, while the Russian media are all lies and propaganda. It's not true. But it's getting to the point where you cannot be a reasonable person, or look at things objectively, because you are pushed into taking sides.

That's where journalism is a very dangerous thing – especially here. There was a lot of dangerous reporting during the cold war that in some cases pushed the two sides into dangerous confrontations. That can happen again. We were lucky to escape the 60's without a nuclear war. Now we are rushing ourselves back into something that William Polk, a writer and former diplomat of the Kennedy administration, has called a possible Cuban missile crisis in reverse. This time we're the ones pushing our military forces onto the Russian border, rather than the Russians putting missiles onto a place like Cuba. We know how Americans reacted to that. Now the Russians are facing something very similar.

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