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Loving a Putsch – Cheering a "Democratic Neo-Nazi Coup" in Ukraine

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Logo of Ukraine's extreme right-wing nationalist party, Svoboda.

There's been much celebration in U.S. political and media circles over the violent ouster of Ukraine's democratically elected president. Nearly everyone is hailing this putsch and ignoring that it was spurred on by neo-Nazi militias.

There was always a measure of hypocrisy but Official Washington used to at least pretend to stand for "democracy," rather than taking such obvious pleasure in destabilizing elected governments, encouraging riots, overturning constitutional systems and then praising violent putsches.

But events in Ukraine and Venezuela suggest that the idea of respecting the results of elections and working within legal, albeit flawed, political systems is no longer in vogue, unless the "U.S. side" happens to win, of course. If the "U.S. side" loses, then it's time for some "shock doctrine." And, of course, the usual demonizing of the "enemy" leader.

Ukraine's ousted President Viktor Yanukovych was surely no one's idea of a pristine politician, though it looks like there are few to none of those in Ukraine, a country essentially controlled by a collection of billionaire oligarchs who jockey for power and shift their allegiances among corrupt politicians.

But Yanukovych was elected in what was regarded as a reasonably fair election in 2010. Indeed, some international observers called the election an important step toward establishing an orderly political process in Ukraine.

But Yanukovych sought to maintain cordial relations with neighboring Russia, which apparently rubbed American neocons the wrong way. Official Washington's still-influential neocons have been livid with Russia's President Vladimir Putin because he cooperated with U.S. President Barack Obama in averting U.S. wars against Iran and Syria.

In both cases, the neocons thought they had maneuvered Obama into confrontations that could have advanced their long-term strategy of "regime change" across the Middle East, a process that started in 2003 with the U.S. invasion of Iraq but stalled with that disastrous war.

However, last year, prospects for more U.S. military interventions in two other target countries – Iran and Syria – were looking up, as Israel joined with Saudi Arabia in stoking regional crises that would give Obama no choice but to launch American air strikes, against Iran's nuclear facilities and against Syrian government targets.

Putin's Interference

That strategy was going swimmingly until Putin helped bring Iran to the negotiating table over guarantees that its nuclear program would not lead to a nuclear weapon. Putin also brokered a deal to avert threatened U.S. air strikes on Syria over disputed evidence regarding who launched a chemical attack on civilians outside Damascus. Putin got the Syrian government to agree to eliminate its chemical weapons arsenal.

So, Putin found himself in the center of the neocons' bulls-eye and – given some of his own unforced errors such as defending Russia's intolerance toward gays and spending excessively on the Sochi Olympics – he became the latest "designated villain," denounced and ridiculed across the neocon-dominated op-ed pages of the Washington Post and other major news outlets.

Even NBC, from its treasured spot as the network of the Olympic Games, felt it had no choice but todenounce Putin in an extraordinary commentary delivered by anchor Bob Costas. Once the demonizing ball gets rolling everyone has to join in or risk getting run over, too.

All of which set the stage for Ukraine. The issue at hand was whether Yanukovych should accept a closer relationship with the European Union, which was demanding substantial economic "reforms," including an austerity plan dictated by the International Monetary Fund. Yanukovych balked at the harsh terms and turned to Ukraine's neighbor Russia, which was offering a $15 billion loan and was keeping Ukraine's economy afloat with discounted natural gas.

Reasonable people can disagree about whether the EU was driving too hard a bargain or whether Ukraine should undertake such painful economic "reforms" – or how Yanukovych should have balanced the interests of his divided country, with the east dominated by ethnic Russians and the west leaning toward Europe.

But protesters from western Ukraine, including far-right nationalists, sought to turn this policy dispute into a means for overthrowing the elected government. Police efforts to quell the disturbances turned violent, with the police not the only culprits. Police faced armed neo-Nazi storm troopers who attacked with firebombs and other weapons.

Though the U.S. news media did show scenes of these violent melees, the U.S. press almost universally blamed Yanukovych – and took almost gleeful pleasure as his elected government collapsed and was replaced by thuggish right-wing militias "guarding" government buildings.

With Yanukovych and many of his supporters fleeing for their lives, the opposition parties seized control of parliament and began passing draconian new laws often unanimously, as neo-Nazi thugs patrolled the scene. Amazingly, the U.S. news media treated all this as uplifting, a popular uprising against a tyrant, not a case of a coup government operating in collusion with violent extremists.

In the upside-down world that has become the U.S. news media, the democratically elected president was a dictator and the coup makers who overthrew the popularly chosen leader were "pro-democracy" activists.

A Curious History

There's also a curious history behind U.S. attitudes toward ethnically divided Ukraine. During Ronald Reagan's presidency – as he escalated Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union – one of his propaganda services, Radio Liberty, began broadcasting commentaries into Ukraine from right-wing exiles.

Some of the commentaries praised Ukrainian nationalists who had sided with the Nazis in World War II as the SS waged its "final solution" against European Jews. The propaganda broadcasts provoked outrage from Jewish organizations, such as B'nai B'rith, and individuals including conservative academic Richard Pipes.

According to an internal memo dated May 4, 1984, and written by James Critchlow, a research officer at the Board of International Broadcasting, which managed Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, one RL broadcast in particular was viewed as "defending Ukrainians who fought in the ranks of the SS."

Critchlow wrote, "An RL Ukrainian broadcast of Feb. 12, 1984 contains references to the Nazi-oriented Ukrainian-manned SS 'Galicia' Division of World War II which may have damaged RL's reputation with Soviet listeners. The memoirs of a German diplomat are quoted in a way that seems to constitute endorsement by RL of praise for Ukrainian volunteers in the SS division, which during its existence fought side by side with the Germans against the Red Army."

Harvard Professor Pipes, who was an informal adviser to the Reagan administration, also inveighed against the RL broadcasts, writing – on Dec. 3, 1984 – "the Russian and Ukrainian services of RL have been transmitting this year blatantly anti-Semitic material to the Soviet Union which may cause the whole enterprise irreparable harm."

Though the Reagan administration publicly defended RL against some of the public criticism, privately some senior officials agreed with the critics, according to documents in the archives of the Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. For instance, in a Jan. 4, 1985, memo, Walter Raymond Jr., a top official on the National Security Council, told his boss, National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane, that "I would believe much of what Dick [Pipes] says is right."

This three-decade-old dispute over U.S.-sponsored radio broadcasts underscores the troubling political reality of Ukraine, which straddles a dividing line between people with cultural ties oriented toward the West and those with a cultural heritage more attuned to Russia. Though the capital Kiev sits in a region dominated by the western Ukrainians, the Russian-allied Ukrainians represent most of the population, explaining Yanukovych's electoral victory.

Loving a Putsch

Now, right-wing militias, representing those historical resentments toward the Russians and hostility toward the Jews, have seized control of many government buildings in Kiev. Faced with this intimidation, the often-unanimous decisions by the remaining legislators would normally be viewed with extreme skepticism, including their demands for the capture and likely execution of Yanukovych.

But the U.S. press corps can't get beyond its demonization of Putin and Yanukovych. The

neocon Washington Post has been almost euphoric over the coup, as expressed in a Feb. 24 editorial:

“Ukraine has shaken off its corrupt president and the immediate prospect of domination by Russia — but at the risk of further conflict. The decision by Viktor Yanukovych to flee Kiev over the weekend triggered the disintegration of his administration and prompted parliament to replace him and schedule elections for May.

“The moves were democratic — members of Mr. Yanukovych’s party joined in the parliamentary votes — but they had the effect of nullifying an accord between the former government and opposition that had been brokered by the European Union and tacitly supported by Russia.

“Kiev is now controlled by pro-Western parties that say they will implement the association agreement with the European Union that Mr. Yanukovych turned away from three months ago, triggering the political crisis.

“There remain two big threats to this positive outcome. One is that Ukraine’s finances will collapse in the absence of a bailout from Russia or the West. The other is that the country will split along geographic lines as Russian speakers in the east of the country, perhaps supported by Moscow, reject the new political order.”

The Post continued, “What’s not clear is whether Mr. Putin would accept a Ukraine that is not under the Kremlin’s thumb. The first indications are not good: Though Mr. Putin has been publicly silent about Ukraine since Friday, the rhetoric emanating from his government has been angry and belligerent. A foreign ministry statement Monday alleged that ‘a course has been set to use dictatorial and sometimes terrorist methods to suppress dissenters in various regions.’”

So, the Washington Post’s editors consider the violent overthrow of a democratically elected president to be “democratic” and take comfort in “democratic” actions by a legislature, despite the curious lack of any no votes and the fact that this balloting has occurred under the watchful eye of neo-Nazi storm troopers patrolling government offices. And, according to the Post, the Russian government is unhinged to detect “dictatorial and sometimes terrorist methods.”

The New York Times editorial page was only slightly less celebratory, proclaiming: “The venal president of Ukraine is on the run and the bloodshed has stopped, but it is far too early to celebrate or to claim that the West has ‘won’ or that Russia has ‘lost.’ One incontrovertible lesson from the events in Kiev, Ukraine’s capital, is that the deeply divided country will have to contend with dangerous problems that could reverberate beyond its borders.”

There has been, of course, a long and inglorious history of the U.S. government supporting the overthrow of elected governments: Mossadegh in Iran in 1953, Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954, Allende in Chile in 1973, Aristide in Haiti twice, Chavez in Venezuela briefly in 2002, Zelaya in Honduras in 2009, Morsi in Egypt in 2013, and others. After Yanukovych, the next target of these U.S.-embraced “democratic” coups looks to be Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela.

In these cases, it is typical for the mainstream U.S. news media to obsess over perceived flaws in the ousted leaders. On Wednesday, for instance, the New York Times made much

of an unfinished presidential palace in Ukraine, calling it “a fugitive leader’s folly.” The idea seems to be to cement in the minds of impressionable Americans that it is okay for the U.S. government to support the overthrow of democratically elected presidents if they have flaws.

The outcomes for the people of these countries that are “saved” from their imperfect leaders, however, often tend to be quite ugly. Usually, they experience long periods of brutal repression at the hands of dictators, but that typically happens outside the frame of the U.S. news media’s focus or interest. Those unhappy countries fade from view almost as quickly as they were thrust to center stage, next to the demonization of their elected leaders.

[For more on Ukraine, see Consortiumnews.com’s “Neocons and the Ukraine Coup.”]

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his new book, America’s Stolen Narrative, either in print here or as an e-book (from Amazon and barnesandnoble.com). For a limited time, you also can order Robert Parry’s trilogy on the Bush Family and its connections to various right-wing operatives for only $34. The trilogy includes America’s Stolen Narrative. For details on this offer, click here.

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