

## Oliver Stone Praised as ‘Peacemaker’ for Talking to Putin

Academic says the media demonizes the Russian President because he is often "at odds with America's neocon-dominated leaders and their efforts to maintain U.S. unipolarity."

By [Peter Kuznick](#) and [Edu Montesanti](#)

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*Oliver Stone's Vladimir Putin interviews have recently shaken the American media, historically devoted to attacking the Russian president. American historian, author and director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University, Peter Kuznick, who co-wrote Untold History of the United States with Stone, explicates the mainstream media's demonization of the Russian president, and now the renowned filmmaker.*

"That's what happens to peacemakers in this sick world," quipped Professor Doctor Kuznick.

Edu Montesanti: Professor Doctor Peter Kuznick, thank you so very much again for the unspeakable privilege of being your partner in publications all over the world. How do you evaluate American media coverage of Oliver Stone's recent interviews with the Russian President Vladimir Putin?

Peter Kuznick: I completely understand why Oliver Stone would want to interview Vladimir Putin. I completely understand why the interviews would be so controversial. And I completely understand why so many of the critics would want to kill Oliver – the Messenger – rather than deal with the content of what Putin told Oliver in the interviews.

Oliver's interest in Russia and Putin is not some kind of passing whimsy. Oliver is a child of the Cold War, who grew up in its shadow. His father was a conservative Republican. In his home, the Soviets were the bad guys out to conquer the world. Most Americans believed that in the 1950s and early 1960s.

Oliver was very patriotic and politically conservative. As a freshman at Yale in 1964, he supported Barry Goldwater for president. Oliver later dropped out of Yale and volunteered for combat in Vietnam, where he was wounded twice and highly decorated. Not only did he believe that the United States was on the right side, he risked his life for his convictions. Vietnam planted some seeds of doubt, but he was just beginning to figure things out. He didn't have some sudden epiphany.

As late as 1980, Oliver voted for Ronald Reagan. It wasn't really until his visit to El Salvador in the early 1980s that he began to understand the nature of the American empire and the insidious impact of American exceptionalism. Then his views began to change, as was

evident in his movies *Salvador*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Wall Street*, and *JFK*—all made during an extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented, burst of creativity between 1986 and 1991.

As with all of us who grew up during the Cold War, Oliver was fascinated with Russia. In the 1980s, he visited the Soviet Union, met with dissidents and wrote a script about them. Oliver says it was very good. I'm sure it was. However, it was too serious a movie for Hollywood at that time and never got made. But, Oliver's interest in Russia never waned.

U.S.-Russian relations are at the heart of our *Untold History of the United States* documentary film and book project. While we worked on this for five years, Oliver studied Russian history as well as the history of U.S. foreign policy. We presented a very different portrait of these topics than most Americans learn in school or in the U.S. media. We showed that the armed U.S. opposition to the Russian Revolution and the overt U.S. support for the counter-revolutionaries.

We demolished the myth that the Americans won the Second World War in Europe, showing that it was the Soviets who did the bulk of the fighting, the bulking of the dying, and the bulking of the killing of German forces, suffering 27 million dead in the process.

While deploring Stalin's extraordinary brutality, we showed that it was the U.S. that held all the cards after WWII – from a booming economy to a network of bases around the globe to a monopoly of atomic bombs – and bore the principal responsibility for starting the Cold War.

We delved into the history of the Cold War, focusing largely on the ways the U.S. departed from its professed ideals to overthrow popular democratic leaders, interfere in other countries' political processes, support dictators and tyrants who gave free rein to avaricious U.S. corporations and banks, and intervene militarily across the globe – the nearly four million dead Vietnamese being only the most obvious victims.

But Russia remained at the center of the story as the Soviets responded to the massive U.S. nuclear arsenal built largely under President Eisenhower by building one of their own as the world quaked under the prospect of universal annihilation.

Subsequent decades saw the easing and heightening of tensions, but the danger of mutually assured destruction never abated until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. There was even a brief moment of hope for humanity as Gorbachev, a true visionary, tried desperately to create a world of peace and democracy. Unfortunately, he lacked a partner in the United States or Europe.

The 1990s were a disaster for the Russian people as Boris Yeltsin, with the prodding of U.S. advisors, put the economy through shock therapy so savage that it wrecked standards of living and created a new group of blood-sucking plutocrats or oligarchs almost overnight.

During that dismal decade, Russian life expectancy plummeted and the economy shrank to the size of Holland's. Russia went from being a superpower to being a doormat on which the United States wiped its feet. It was Putin who engineered Russia's dramatic recovery and restored it to the status of a great nation and major player in world affairs.

At first, Putin reached out to the United States, seeking friendly relations. But U.S. policymakers had grown accustomed to treating Russia with contempt in the 1990s and getting away with it. They assumed that Russia would continue to roll over upon U.S. command under Putin. They were in for a rude awakening.

With the help of higher energy prices, Putin reversed Russia's economic decline and its economy grew rapidly. Standards of living and life expectancy rose. He also reversed Russia's military decline, bolstering and modernizing its armed forces.

In 2006, the Council of Foreign Relations' Foreign Affairs magazine even published an article claiming that the United States had achieved its long-sought first-strike capability. The authors argued that if the United States launched a nuclear attack on Russia, Russia would be defenseless and incapable of striking back. That sent heads spinning in the Kremlin.

On top of that, Russia was surrounded by NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). Despite promises by President George H.W. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker, NATO expanded 12 (now 13 with Montenegro) countries to the east, right up to Russia's doorstep.

When George W. Bush began promoting further expansion to include Georgia and Ukraine, Putin decided enough was enough and began his resistance. He decided that the United States and Europe were not trustworthy partners. He realized that they were out to weaken, humiliate and marginalize Russia.

The European Union's effort to ensnare Ukraine was another step too far for Putin who responded to the U.S.-backed coup by seizing the former Russian territory of Crimea and supporting the resistance in the Donbass.

Russia became more assertive on other fronts too, including Syria. It strengthened ties to China and other nations that mistrusted U.S. hegemonic intentions. Under Putin's leadership, Russia became a player again on the world stage.

In response, American political leaders and the lapdog media began a campaign of Putin vilification in the United States and parts of Europe. Tensions escalated between the United States, NATO, and Russia in Syria, Ukraine, and the Baltics. Neither side respected the other's red lines. The threat of war loomed larger and larger.

Oliver and I, along with many of our colleagues, grew alarmed and said so publicly as often as we could. But Oliver had a chance to do more and he seized it. He wanted to bring Putin's views to the public in hopes that understanding how the world looks to Putin would help ease tensions between the U.S. and Russia.

He wanted to show that Putin was not the bloodthirsty ogre he is often portrayed to be. He hoped to break through the U.S. media vituperation toward Putin and his policies so the United States and Russia might be able to find common ground, act together where we have common interests and ease tensions where we don't.

Oliver is well aware that the United States and Russia have more than one thousand nuclear weapons pointed at each other on hair-trigger alert. He is well aware that two individuals - Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin - have veto power over the future existence of our species.

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, (John F.) Kennedy and (Nikita S.) Khrushchev discovered how fragile life on this planet really is and endeavored to work together to eliminate everything between our two nations that could cause another such crisis. Unfortunately, they were not able to see that effort through to fruition.

In bringing Putin to the American public and letting him speak for himself, Oliver was acting in the tradition of Kennedy and Khrushchev. He was being a peacemaker. Oliver reached out his hand and stuck out his neck.

And the lockstep American media, led by the New York Times, Newsweek, and the Daily Beast, stomped on his fingers and tried to cut off his head. That's what happens to peacemakers in this sick world.



Why do you think the American media demonizes President Putin?

The American media demonizes Putin because he defends what he believes to be Russia's national interests, which often puts him at odds with America's neocon-dominated leaders and their efforts to maintain U.S. unipolarity.

In fact, American policymakers don't even recognize that Russia has national security interests that need to be respected. The U.S. media lacks historical context and perspective. One can turn on CNN or other networks and hear all the "experts" agree that Russia's alleged hacking of the U.S. election was an "act of war." They call for sanctions and boycotts and aggressive measures. No one ever mentions the U.S. history of intervening in election after election all over the globe, including in Russia, since 1947, and throughout Latin America starting long before that.

The pundits talk about the need to punish Russia for its actions in Ukraine. Did they call on the world to boycott the United States for its invasion of Iraq? Did they call for sanctions against the United States and NATO for overthrowing (Muammar) Gaddafi in Libya and further spreading chaos throughout the region? Are they even capable of judging the United States the way they judge other nations? Of course not. This is the sickness of nationalism and parochialism. It is what we call American exceptionalism – a blindness toward America's own "mistakes" because our motivations are so pure.

Well, after you see the United States intervening into, bombing, invading, hacking, surveilling, droning, looting one country after another, you start questioning the purity of America's motives – at least you do if you're still able to think rationally and critically.

The problem with the American media is not that it knowingly spreads "fake news." The problem is that its frame of reference is so narrow that it excludes versions of history, truth and reality that challenge the American exceptionalist framework. As Samuel Huntington wrote, "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion...but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence. Westerners often forget this fact; non-Westerners never do."

Knowing how dismissive the American media is of views that in any way challenge the mainstream consensus, as Oliver obviously does, he might have adopted a slightly different approach in his own media appearances around the Putin interviews.

Instead of stating categorically that Putin didn't hack the U.S. election, I think it's better to say that we have yet to see solid evidence to support that charge. Russia has the capability to hack those emails and might have had the motivation to do so, given hostile U.S. behavior that goes back several years. We can't rule out the possibility. But, on the other hand, there are reasons to question the certainty of the 17 U.S. intelligence agencies, which essentially boils down to the three that did the study.

First, the hack was extremely sloppy and the hackers left so many fingerprints behind that it appears that they wanted to get caught or, alternatively, to cast blame on Russia.

Second, it would have been uncharacteristically risky behavior on Putin's part to do something that would antagonize the United States and (Hillary) Clinton, especially in light of the fact that neither he nor anyone else in either country expected Trump to win, probably including Trump himself.

Third, it defies credulity to believe that both the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) and the Democratic National Committee thought it was sufficient to accept the private security firm CrowdStrike's investigation of the hack without the FBI conducting its own investigation.

And fourth, the argument that the Russians wanted to undermine American democracy makes no sense. Nothing could possibly have done more to make a mockery of American democracy than the Republican primary campaign and Trump candidacy.

With 17 flat-earthers arguing over who was the biggest ignoramus when it came to climate change and science in general and debating who had the biggest penis, did Russia really need to intervene to discredit American democracy? The Americans were doing a good enough job without Russian help. That U.S. voters chose a colossally ignorant and bigoted reality TV host and pathological liar as president is more than sufficient proof that the United States is a failed democracy.

But Oliver, not wanting to give an inch to the Putin-bashers who run roughshod over American political discourse, dug in his heels and denied the possibility that Russia was behind the hack and distribution of emails to Wikileaks. I would have just said that that many governments and private outlets hack and there has been no proof yet provided that the Russians were Wikileaks' source.

In fact, Julian Assange has adamantly denied this on numerous occasions. But, I would not reject the possibility that the Russians did this and that Putin was involved because governments often act irrationally and go against their own interests.

What is the importance of such interviews, and what are the most important passages of them to you?

The most important thing about the interviews is that they humanize Putin. That in itself is a major achievement at a time when the U.S. media presents him as a comic book villain.

In the interviews, Putin comes across as a knowledgeable and reasonable defender of Russian national interests even if he clearly dissembles on occasion. He has a coherent view of history, much of which I tend to share. I was glad to see a copy of the thousand-page Russian translation of our Untold History book on his desk.

I certainly don't agree with Putin on everything.

For example, I have a much more laudatory view of Mikhail Gorbachev than Putin does. Yes, Gorbachev should have been more practical and less trusting, as Putin tells Oliver. He should have gotten in writing the promise from Bush and Baker not to expand NATO one thumb's width to the east. That was extremely naïve of him.

But, I welcome and admire Gorbachev's utopianism and faith in humanity and wish that more shared it. He wanted to replace the failed Soviet system with a democratic socialist one and establish a new international order based on shared peaceful development.

Unfortunately, he never got the chance. Yeltsin replaced him. Putin rescued Russia from the Yeltsin debacle, but the country, like its leader, has some profoundly and disappointingly conservative tendencies in its embrace of capitalism, nationalism, and religion and in its ties to some pretty unsavory characters around the world.

Putin justifies many of Russia's excesses by saying that its democracy is still young. To me, an outspoken critic of American "democracy," that is not good enough.

In Russia, I would much rather see a more open media, a more equal distribution of wealth, not only toleration but encouragement of dissent, explicit repudiation of all forms of discrimination against gays and lesbians, greater protection for journalists and more vigorous prosecution of their assailants, and a diminished role for religion. But Putin has different ideas and he expressed them clearly in the interviews. His ideas apparently resonate with the vast majority of Russians.

His approval ratings still top 80 percent and the hit that the economy has taken due to falling oil and gas prices and American and European sanctions have not dented those approval ratings. Gorbachev, who provided the first blurb in support of our Untold History project, is, I'm sorry to say, much less popular in Russia despite the fact that he came so tantalizingly close to abolishing nuclear weapons at Reykjavik in 1986 in what would have been one of the greatest achievements in all of human history.

Those quibbles aside, the interviews provide an unprecedented opportunity to understand the Russian perspective on many of the crucial issues of our time.

Putin details his views on Syria, Ukraine, NATO, U.S. politics and foreign policy, cyber warfare, terrorism, climate change, and a host of other issues.

I found his cautionary statements about the nuclear threat to be particularly revealing and I very much appreciated that Oliver convinced Putin to sit down with him and watch Dr.



Strangelove, Stanley Kubrick's brilliant black comedy about nuclear annihilation.

Putin thought the film raised "serious issues" about "real threats that exist." He said that "little has changed" since the film was made in 1964. Though modern nuclear weapons, he warned, are "more sophisticated, more complex," the "idea of a retaliatory strike and the inability to manage these systems" is just as relevant today. And these things, he predicted, will "become even more difficult and more dangerous" in the future.

Oliver got Putin to talk about his own background and family history and questioned him about his desire to retain power and control. In the fourth interview, Oliver pushed Putin hard to defend alleged Russian hacking of the recent U.S. election. Putin's repeated denials were less than convincing.

His statement that Russia doesn't intervene in other countries' internal affairs sounded ludicrous. We know that all powerful nations do so. Perhaps his comment that every action brings a counter-action was more to the point, especially after he detailed a long list of U.S. actions that were hostile toward Russia.

What one comes away with is a good understanding of how Putin views the collapse of U.S.-Russian relations since the end of Communism. He clearly doesn't like the current hostility between the two nations, repeatedly referring to the Americans as his "partners" and urging improved relations between the world's two most powerful nations.

He says he is cautiously optimistic. But he is also a realist. At the end of the interview, after they had watched Strangelove, Oliver handed Putin the DVD case to keep in case he wanted to watch it again. Putin thanked him and opened up the case to find that it was empty. "Typical American gift!" he declared.

Oliver knew that he was going to pay a steep price for giving Vladimir Putin a platform to express his views on American television. And he has been pounded mercilessly across American media.

At the end of the third interview, Putin asked Oliver if he'd ever been beaten. "Oh, yes, many times," Oliver said. Putin responded presciently, "Then it's not going to be anything new, because you're going to suffer for what you are about to do." To which, Oliver replied, "I know... but it's worth it. It's worth it to try to bring some more peace and consciousness to the world." Sadly, there are many who don't share that goal.

*Edu Montesanti is an independent analyst, researcher and journalist whose work has been published by Truth Out, Pravda, Global Research, Brazilian magazine Caros Amigos and numerous other publications across the globe.*

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