

The U.S. Mainstream Media Black Hole and the Danger of False Narrative

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Like a decade ago with Iraq, Official Washington's pundits and pols are locked shoulder-to-shoulder in a phalanx of misguided consensus on Ukraine, presenting a false narrative that is taking U.S. policy into dangerous directions.

The American people got a nasty taste of the danger that can come with false narrative when they were suckered into the Iraq War based on bogus claims that Saddam Hussein was hiding weapons of mass destruction that he planned to share with al-Qaeda.

Nearly 4,500 U.S. soldiers died in the conflict along with hundreds thousands of Iraqis. The war's total financial cost probably exceeded \$1 trillion, a vast sum that siphoned off America's economic vitality and forced cutbacks in everything from education to road repair. Plus, the war ended up creating an Iraqi base for al-Qaeda terrorists that had not existed before.



President Barack Obama talks with Secretary of State John Kerry and National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice in the Oval Office on March 19, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

But perhaps an even more dangerous problem coming out of the Iraq War was that almost no one in Official Washington who pushed the false narrative – whether in politics or in the press – was held accountable in any meaningful way. Many of the same pols and pundits remain in place today, pushing similar false narratives on new crises, from Ukraine to Syria to Iran.

Those false narratives – and their cumulative effect on policymaking – now represent a clear and present danger to the Republic and, indeed, to the world. The United States, after all, is the preeminent superpower with unprecedented means for delivering death and destruction. But almost nothing is being done to address this enduring American crisis of

deception.

Today, Official Washington is marching in lockstep just as it did in 2002-03 when it enforced the misguided consensus on Iraq's WMD. The latest case is Ukraine where Russian President Vladimir Putin is accused of committing "aggression" to expand Russian territory at the expense of noble "democratic" reformers in Kiev.

Not only is this the dominant storyline in the U.S. media; it is virtually the only narrative permitted in the mainstream press. But the real narrative is that the United States and the European Union provoked this crisis by trying to take Ukraine out of its traditional sphere of influence, Russia, and put it in to a new association with the EU.

While there's nothing inherently wrong with Ukraine joining with the EU or staying with Russia (or a combination of the two) – depending on the will of the people and their elected representatives – this latest U.S./EU plan was motivated, at least in part, by hostility toward Russia.

That attitude was expressed in a Sept. 26, 2013, [op-ed](#) in the Washington Post by Carl Gershman, the neoconservative president of the National Endowment for Democracy, which doles out more than \$100 million in U.S. funds a year to help organize "activists," support "journalists" and finance programs that can be used to destabilize targeted governments.

Gershman, whose job amounts to being a neocon paymaster, expressed antagonism toward Russia in the op-ed and identified Ukraine as "the biggest prize," the capture of which could ultimately lead to the ouster of Putin, who "may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself."

The NED, which was founded in 1983 to do in relative openness what the CIA had long done in secret, [listed](#) 65 projects that it was financing in Ukraine, using U.S. taxpayers' money. In other words, Gershman's op-ed reflected U.S. policy – at least inside the State Department's still-neocon-dominated bureaucracy – which viewed the EU's snatching of Ukraine from Russia's embrace as a way to weaken Russia and hurt Putin.

'European Aspirations'

Later, as the Ukrainian crisis unfolded, another neocon, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, [reminded](#) Ukrainian businessmen that the United States had invested \$5 billion in their "European aspirations," implying that the U.S. expected something for all this money.

You might wonder why the American taxpayers should spend \$5 billion on the "European aspirations" of Ukraine when there are so many needs at home, but a more relevant question may be: Why is the United States spending that much money to stir up trouble on Russia's border? The Cold War is over but the hostility continues.

Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates described this thinking in his memoir, *Duty*, explaining the view of President George H.W. Bush's Defense Secretary Dick Cheney: "When the Soviet Union was collapsing in late 1991, Dick wanted to see the dismantlement not only of the Soviet Union and the Russian empire but of Russia itself, so it could never again be a threat to the rest of the world."

As Vice President, Cheney and the neocons around him pursued a similar strategy during

George W. Bush's presidency, expanding NATO aggressively to the east and backing anti-Russian regimes in the region including the hardline Georgian government, which provoked a military confrontation with Moscow in 2008.

Since President Barack Obama never took full control of his foreign policy apparatus – leaving the Bush Family apparatchik Gates at Defense and naming neocon-leaning Democrat Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State – the bureaucratic momentum toward confronting Russia continued. Indeed, the elevation of operatives like Nuland, the wife of prominent neocon Robert Kagan, gave new impetus to the anti-Russian strategy.

Secretary of State John Kerry, who got his “dream job” last year with the considerable help of his neocon chum Sen. John McCain, has acted as a kind of sock puppet for this neocon-dominated State Department bureaucracy.

Either because he is overly focused on his legacy-building initiative of an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal or because he has long since sold out his anti-war philosophy from the Vietnam War era, Kerry has repeatedly taken the side of the hawks: on Syria, Iran and now Ukraine.

On Syria and Iran, it was largely the behind-the-scenes cooperation between Obama and Putin that tamped down those crises last year and opened a pathway for diplomacy – much to the chagrin of the neocons who favored heightened confrontations, U.S. military strikes and “regime change.” Thus, it became a neocon priority to divide Obama from Putin. Ukraine became the wedge.

The Crisis

The Ukrainian crisis took a decisive turn on Nov. 21, 2013, when President Viktor Yanukovich rebuffed a deal offered by the EU and the International Monetary Fund because it would have imposed harsh austerity on the already suffering Ukrainian people. Yanukovich opted instead for a more generous aid package of \$15 billion from Russia, with few strings attached.

But Yanukovich's turning away from the EU infuriated the U.S. State Department as well as pro-European demonstrators who filled the Maidan square in Kiev. The protests reflected the more anti-Russian attitudes of western Ukraine, where Kiev is located, but not the more pro-Russian feelings of eastern and southern Ukraine, Yanukovich's strongholds that accounted for his electoral victory in 2010.

Though the Maidan protests involved hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians simply eager for a better life and a less corrupt government, some of the most militant factions came from far-right parties, like Svoboda, and even neo-Nazi militias from the Right Sektor. When protesters seized City Hall, Nazi symbols and [a Confederate battle flag](#) were put on display.

As the protests grew angrier, U.S. officials, including Assistant Secretary Nuland and Sen. McCain, openly sided with the demonstrators despite banners honoring Stepan Bandera, a World War II-era fascist whose paramilitary forces collaborated with the Nazis in the extermination of Poles and Jews. Nuland passed out cookies and McCain stood shoulder to shoulder with right-wing Ukrainian nationalists. [For more on the role of Ukrainian neo-Nazis, watch [this report from the BBC](#).]

On Feb. 20, the violence intensified as mysterious snipers fired on both protesters and police. As police fought back, neo-Nazi militias hurled Molotov cocktails. More than 80

people were killed including more than a dozen police officers, but the U.S. press blamed the Yanukovych government for the violence, portraying the demonstrators as innocent victims.

Official Washington's narrative was set. Yanukovych, who had been something of a hero when he was moving toward the EU agreement in the early fall, became a villain after he decided that the IMF's demands were too severe and especially after he accepted the deal from Putin. The Russian president was undergoing his own demonization in the U.S. news media, including an extraordinary denunciation by NBC at the end of the Sochi Winter Olympics.

In the U.S. media's black-and-white scenario, the "pro-democracy" demonstrators in the Maidan were the good guys who were fired upon by the bad-guy police. The New York Times even stopped reporting that some of those killed were police, instead presenting the more pleasing but phony narrative that "more than 80 protesters were shot to death by the police as an uprising spiraled out of control in mid-February."

To this day, the identity of the snipers who touched off the conflagration remains in serious doubt. I was told at the time that some U.S. intelligence analysts believed the shooters were associated with the far-right opposition groups, not with the Yanukovych government.

That analysis gained support when a phone call surfaced between Estonia's Foreign Minister Urmas Paet and European Union foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton, Paet reported on a conversation that he had with a doctor in Kiev who said the sniper fire that killed protesters was the same that killed police officers.

As [reported by the UK Guardian](#), "During the conversation, Paet quoted a woman named Olga – who the Russian media identified her as Olga Bogomolets, a doctor – blaming snipers from the opposition shooting the protesters."

Paet said, "What was quite disturbing, this same Olga told that, well, all the evidence shows that people who were killed by snipers from both sides, among policemen and people from the streets, that they were the same snipers killing people from both sides.

"So she also showed me some photos, she said that as medical doctor, she can say it is the same handwriting, the same type of bullets, and it's really disturbing that now the new coalition, that they don't want to investigate what exactly happened. ... So there is a stronger and stronger understanding that behind snipers it was not Yanukovych, it was somebody from the new coalition."

Ashton replied: "I think we do want to investigate. I didn't pick that up, that's interesting. Gosh."

Though this exchange does not prove that the opposition used snipers to provoke the violence, it is relevant information that could have altered how Americans viewed the worsening crisis in Ukraine. However, except for an on-the-scene report from CNN with the same doctor, the Paet-Ashton phone call disappeared into the U.S. media's black hole reserved for information that doesn't fit with a preferred narrative.

Black Hats/White Hats

So, with giant black hats glued onto Yanukovych and Putin and white hats on the protesters,

the inspiring but false U.S. narrative played out in heroic fashion, with only passing reference to the efforts by Yanukovych to make concessions and satisfy the protesters' demands.

On Feb. 21, Yanukovych tried to defuse the violence by signing an agreement with three European countries in which he accepted reduced powers, moved up elections so he could be voted out of office, and pulled back the police. That last step, however, opened the way for the neo-Nazi militias to seize government buildings and force Yanukovych to flee for his life.

Then, on Feb. 22, under the watchful eye of these modern-day storm troopers, a rump parliament – in violation of constitutional procedures – voted to impeach Yanukovych, who reemerged in Russia to denounce the actions as a coup.

Despite this highly irregular process, the U.S. government – following the lead of the State Department bureaucracy – immediately recognized the new leadership as Ukraine's "legitimate" government. Putin later appealed to Obama in support of the Feb. 21 agreement but was told the ouster of Yanukovych and the installation of the U.S.-backed government were a *fait accompli*.

The rump parliament in Kiev also accused Yanukovych of mass murder in connection with the shootings in the Maidan — an accusation that got widespread play in the U.S. media – although curiously the new regime also decided not to pursue an investigation into the identity of the mysterious snipers, a point that drew no U.S. media interest.

And, a new law was passed in line with the desires of right-wing Ukrainian nationalists to eliminate Russian as one of the country's official languages. New government leaders also were dispatched to the Russian-ethnic regions to take charge, moves that, in turn, prompted resistance from Russian-ethnic citizens in the east and south.

It was in this context – and with appeals from Yanukovych and ethnic Russians for help – that Putin got permission from the Duma to intervene militarily if necessary. Russian troops, already stationed in bases in Crimea, moved to block the Kiev regime from asserting its authority in that strategic Black Sea peninsula.

Amidst this political chaos, the Crimean parliament voted to break away from Ukraine and join Russia, putting the question to a popular vote on March 16. Not surprisingly, given the failed Ukrainian state, its inability to pay for basic services, and Crimea's historic ties to Russia, Crimean voters approved the switch overwhelmingly. Exit polls showed about a 93 percent majority, just three points less than the official results.

Russia then moved to formally reclaim Crimea, which had been part of Russia dating back to the 1700s, while also massing troops along the borders of eastern Ukraine, presumably as a warning to the Kiev regime not to crush popular resistance to the anti-Yanukovych coup.

A Divergent Narrative

So, the factual narrative suggests that the Ukrainian crisis was stoked by elements of the U.S. government, both in the State Department and in Congress, encouraging and exploiting popular resentments in western Ukraine. The goal was to pull Ukraine out of Russia's orbit and put it into the EU's gravitational pull.

When Yanukovych balked at IMF's demands, a process of "regime change" was put in motion with the U.S. and EU even turning their backs on the Feb. 21 agreement in which Yanukovych made a series of concessions negotiated by European countries. The deal was cast aside in a matter of hours with no attempt by the West to uphold its terms.

Meanwhile, Putin, who was tied up with the Sochi Olympics and obsessed over fears that it would be targeted by Islamist terrorists, appears to have been caught off-guard by the events in Ukraine. He then reacted to the alarming developments on Russia's border, including the emergence of neo-Nazis as prominent figures in the coup regime in Kiev.

In other words, a logical – and indeed realistic – way to see the Ukraine-Crimea crisis is that Putin was largely responding to events that were outside his control. And that is important to understand, because that would mean that Putin was not the aggressor spoiling for a fight.

If there was premeditation, it was coming from the West and particularly from the neocons who remain highly influential in Official Washington. The neocons also had motive to go after Putin, since he helped Obama use diplomacy to quiet down dangerous crises with Syria and Iran while the neocons were pushing for more confrontation and U.S. military strikes.

But how did the U.S. news media present the Ukraine story to the American people?

First, there was the simplistic and misleading depiction of the pro-EU demonstrations as "democratic" when they mostly reflected the discontent of the pro-European population of western Ukraine, not the views of the more pro-Russian Ukrainians in the east and south who had pushed Yanukovych to victory in the 2010 election. Last time I checked, "democracy" referred to rule by the majority, not mob rule.

Then, despite the newsworthiness of the neo-Nazi role in the protests, the U.S. news media blacked-out these brown shirts because that ugly reality undercut the pleasing good-guys-vs.-bad-guys storyline. Then, when the snipers opened fire on protesters and policemen, the U.S. news media jumped to the conclusion that the killers were working for Yanukovych because that, too, fit with the desired narrative.

The violent overthrow of the democratically elected Yanukovych was hailed as an expression of "democracy," again with the crucial role of the neo-Nazi militias largely airbrushed from the picture. The unanimous and near unanimous parliamentary votes that followed – as storm troopers patrolled the halls of government buildings – were further cited as evidence of "democracy" and "reform."

The anger and fear of Ukrainians in the east and south were dismissed as Russian "propaganda" and Crimea's move to extract itself from this political chaos was denounced as Russian "aggression." U.S. news outlets casually denounced Putin as a "thug." Washington Post columnist George F. Will called Putin "Stalin's spawn."

Former Secretary of State Clinton cited the Crimea situation to compare Putin to Hitler and to suggest that Putin was intent on recreating the old Soviet empire, though Crimea is only 10,000 square miles, about one-tenth of one percent the size of the old Soviet Union.

And, it wasn't just that some or nearly all mainstream U.S. news organizations adopted this one-sided and misguided narrative. It was a consensus throughout all major U.S. news outlets. With a uniformity that one would normally associate with a totalitarian state, no

competing narrative was permitted in the Big Media, regardless of the actual facts.

Whenever any of the more complex reality was included in a story, it was presented as Russian claims that were then followed by argumentative challenges. Yet, when U.S. officials made preposterous remarks about how uncivilized it was to violate another country's sovereignty, the hypocrisy of their points went uncontested.

For instance, Secretary of State Kerry denounced Putin's intervention in Crimea by declaring, "you just don't in the 21st Century behave in 19th Century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped-up pretext." But you had to look on the Internet to find any writer who dared note Kerry's breathtaking double standard, since he voted in 2002 to authorize the U.S. invasion of Iraq in pursuit of hidden WMD stockpiles that didn't exist.

This cognitive dissonance pervaded the U.S. press and the political debate over Ukraine and Crimea. The long history of U.S. interventions in foreign countries – almost always in violation of international law – was forgotten, except for the rare occasion when some Russian "claim" about American hypocrisy was cited and then swatted down. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[America's Staggering Hypocrisy](#)."]]

Careerism Prevails

Having worked many years in the mainstream U.S. news media, I fully understand how this process works and why it happens. Amid the patriotic chest-thumping that usually accompanies a U.S. military operation or American righteous outrage over some other nation's actions, it is dangerous for your career to go against the flag-waving.

But it's always been my view that such self-censorship is faux patriotism, as much as the happy storylines are false narratives. Even if many Americans don't want the truth, it is still the job of journalists to give them the truth. Otherwise, the U.S. democratic process is distorted and made dangerous.

Propaganda leads to bad policies as politicians – even when they know better – start parroting the errant conventional wisdom. We've seen this now with President Obama who – more than anyone – realizes the value of Putin's cooperation on Syria and Iran but now must join in denouncing the Russian president and demanding sanctions.

Obama also surely knows that Yanukovych's ouster violated both Ukraine's constitution and principles of democracy, but he pretends otherwise. And, he knows that Crimea's secession reflected the will of the people, but he must insist that their vote was illegitimate.

At a March 25 news conference in the Netherlands, Obama toed the line of the hypocritical false narrative. He declared, "we have said consistently throughout this process is that it is up to the Ukrainian people to make their own decisions about how they organize themselves and who they interact with." He then added that the Crimean referendum was "sloppily organized over the course of two weeks" and thus a sham.

If Obama were telling the truth, he would have noted that Yanukovych – for all his faults – was democratically elected in a process that was deemed fair by international observers. Obama would have acknowledged that Yanukovych agreed on Feb. 21 to a process that would have allowed for an orderly and legal process for his replacement.

Obama would have admitted, too, that the violent coup and the actions of the rump

parliament in Kiev were both illegal and, indeed, “sloppily organized” – and that the U.S. government acted hastily in recognizing this coup regime. But double standards seem to be the only standards these days in Official Washington.

What is perhaps tragic about Obama is that he does know better. He is not a stupid man. But he doesn’t dare go against the grain for fear of being denounced as “naïve” about Putin or “weak” in not facing down “Russian aggression.” So, he reads the lines that have been, in effect, dictated by neocons within his own administration.

I’m told that Obama, like Putin, was caught off-guard by the Ukraine crisis. But Obama’s unwillingness or inability to recast the false narrative left him with no political choice but to join in the Putin-bashing. That, in turn, means that Putin won’t be there to help Obama navigate around future U.S. war plans that the neocons have in mind for Syria and Iran.

Indeed, neutralizing the Obama-Putin relationship may have been the chief reason why the neocons were so eager to stoke the Ukrainian fires — and it shows how false narratives can get people killed.

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