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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/05/16/cold-war-obama-style/print>

Cold War Obama-Style

So Much Danger, So Little Resistance

by ANDREW LEVINE

MAY 16-18, 2014

Is a new Cold War looming? It seems so. This shouldn't be happening, but it is.

The confusion that followed the end of the old Cold War is one reason why.

That confusion has been a problem for the anti-imperialist left. While the Cold War was on, there was seldom any need to fall back on principles. Then it was easy for right thinking, well-informed people to side with insurgencies fighting imperial domination; that was what common decency required.

This has not been the case in recent years.

The empire's stewards in the Obama administration and in the military-national security state complex are taking full advantage. So are ostensibly independent NGOs.

It is a risky business – made all the riskier by the cluelessness of the principals. On Team Obama, they know not what they do.

There is a more general problem as well: navigating one's way through the present, as events unfold, is bound to seem complicated, even when, it is not. It is only in retrospect that the complications melt away.

The past, after all, is over. The future is open and how it goes depends, in part, on what we do. Knowing what to do at the moment when events are unfolding requires sound and quick judgment; something in rare supply.

It is therefore wise to be wary of comparisons between the present and the past.

With this caution in mind, I would nevertheless hazard that, some two and a half decades ago, taking sides did indeed become more complicated.

The end of Communism and the demise of the Soviet Union have had a lot to do with bringing this sea change about.

The Soviets were hardly paragons of virtue. But when they set their sights on Western, especially American, imperialism, what they said was usually spot on.

Meanwhile, the Cold War coincided with the glory years of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle.

Contrary to what some anti-Communists believed, the Soviets were hardly behind the changes underway. However, for the most part, they did support them and, in more than a few instances, their material and diplomatic aid was indispensable.

The old colonial powers and, of course, the United States – were typically on the wrong side; the United States often *was* the wrong side. Vietnam is not the only example.

The Soviets were never exactly the right side; the situation was never quite symmetrical. And even when Communists were in the lead – for example, in Cuba and Vietnam — insurgent movements were always more nationalist than pro-Soviet.

But just by being there, Soviet power helped Third World insurgencies assume a progressive, secular orientation. This made it easy for anti-imperialists to side with those insurgencies.

In retrospect, it is clear that Western Third Worldism, like Western Maoism, depended, in part, on wishful thinking. But proponents of these views were not delusional. Much that was admired decades ago really was admirable.

The Chinese too played an important role in anti-imperialist struggles.

It was plain to all but willfully blind Cold Warriors in the West that, by the mid-sixties, Russia and China were at odds. But when it came to siding *against* Western imperialism, the two were generally on the same side.

Then the Soviet Union imploded; and, without looking back, the Chinese took off down the capitalist road.

This left a vacuum in world affairs. It also leaves countries and movements that resist American domination on their own.

Perhaps people who had been living under Communism became better off, though many of them – increasingly many — think otherwise. However geopolitically, the end of Communism has not been a welcome development.

It unleashed the American empire, enabling it to act without fear of upsetting the *modus vivendi* that had come into being after World War II.

Additionally, the end of Communism coincided with, and partly contributed towards, a decline in anti-colonial and national liberation movements and, not unrelatedly, to a rise in religious fanaticism.

This latter development not only made the few remaining anti-imperialist insurgencies less appealing to progressives; it also diminished the efficacy of those movements themselves.

In any case, by then, few colonies remained and national liberation movements no longer seriously discommoded the empire's stewards.

But our erstwhile republic had become a warfare state; it needed enemies.

Oppressed peoples fighting for independence never quite filled the bill; demonizing them was, to say the least, unseemly. After all, America itself had won its independence by waging war against a colonial master and, despite our resource-starved public education system, that fact still registers in most Americans' minds.

Western governments and their media flacks did all they could to villainize Third World revolutionaries. Nevertheless, within their ranks, there were commanding figures who became heroes to progressive forces everywhere, and icons in the youth culture of the time.

For garnering domestic support for military spending, standing *against* the Third World worked for a time, but it was a losing strategy. Even before the Cold War ended, the time was past due for a change.

And an alternative was at hand. With the Soviet Union out of the picture, “rogue states,” states that don't entirely go along with the empire's designs, were just what the doctor ordered.

It therefore didn't take long for them to move to the top of the empire's hit list.

It was not a hard transition to engineer. The old insurgencies, the ones that came to power, did not exactly live up to expectations. But that hardly mattered to public opinion. What mattered

more was that some of the leaders of the states that the U.S. deemed “rogue” were easy to demonize.

It wasn't just a public relations problem either.

This first became evident in the fall of 1990 as the first Bush prepared to attack Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait.

Because Iraq sat atop considerable oil deposits, and because its strongman, Saddam Hussein, waged war against Iran, American policy towards his government had been friendly throughout the eighties.

Indeed, it is still far from clear how much the United States led him to believe that he could invade Kuwait with impunity.

But then, as if on cue, the tables turned. It would not have happened had the Soviet Union not been on its way to oblivion. But since it was, both Saddam and Bush were tempted to do what would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier. The temptation proved irresistible.

Bush could not have asked for a more suitable foe. Saddam was a character out of central casting. He gave the Americans a splendid pretext for projecting military power too; after all, he had invaded a sovereign country without international authorization and for no reason that the international community (the United States and its allies) could abide.

Even so, most progressives held fast to longstanding anti-imperialist convictions.

Hardly anyone sided with Iraq, but the American intervention was roundly condemned – in the United States and throughout the world.

But since Bush the father, unlike his son, actually did accomplish “the mission,” and since he had enough sense not to attempt a full-fledged occupation, the opposition his war stirred up soon subsided.

Bush and then Bill Clinton therefore got away with the sanctions regime they imposed upon Iraq. Clinton's Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, famously proclaimed that she thought it “worth it” that some half million Iraqis died as a result.

But not all the harm the sanctions did was to Iraqis. The low intensity war Washington waged against Iraq throughout the nineties encouraged the rise of a political climate that was more tolerant of American predations overseas than at any time since John Kennedy launched the Vietnam War.

We know where that led. Once Clinton finally fulfilled Ronald Reagan's goal of ending the Vietnam Syndrome, Obama-era “humanitarian interventionism” became all but inevitable.

It was under Clinton too that Cold War politics gained a new lease on life, even with the Soviet Union gone and with Russia hobbled as oligarchs and kleptocrats took control of the hyper-retrograde capitalist economy that Western advisors helped establish.

Clinton and his successors saw to it that the EU – and, worse, NATO – moved right up to the former Soviet Union’s borders, incorporating not only the old Eastern European “satellite” nations, but also three former Soviet Republics – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

This was in blatant violation of promises Reagan had made to Mikhail Gorbachev.

It was plainly provocative too because it violated Russia’s security interests, as anyone who knew anything about Russian – not just Soviet — history would immediately understand.

Of course, this was the whole point for geopolitical strategists like Zbigniew Brzezinski and his counterparts in the Bush I-Clinton-Bush II era. Under Obama and his hapless crew, it is probably the point still – though American diplomacy is now conducted at such a degraded level that it is hard to tell.

Clinton’s other great neo-Cold War “achievement” was to assist in the dismemberment of Yugoslavia. It was a test case for the greater task that lay ahead.

The United States learned a lot in Yugoslavia. The Obama administration and the NGOs in league with it have been eager to put what they learned to use by moving on to other former Soviet republics.

Georgia had been an especially appealing target for neo-Cold Warriors since even before Obama assumed office. But things have not gone well for the West there, and so Team Obama let efforts to make trouble there subside.

This was predictable: the administration had more pressing matters on its plate – like repackaging the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and extending the Bush-Obama War on Terror into new theaters of operation in Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan, and who knows where else.

Then Ukraine came along. It opened up a whole new world of opportunity.

Destabilization was step one; as in Yugoslavia, Europeans, the Germans especially, took the lead. The next step was to facilitate the overthrow of Ukraine’s elected government. It turned out to be too Russia-friendly for Washington’s taste.

At that point, the Europeans, with Germany in the lead, began to come to their senses. Notwithstanding their customary servility towards the American hegemon, their diplomats called for caution. How could they not? They know the territory. Oblivious to the perils, Obama and Company plodded on.

Victoria Nuland, Obama’s Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs and Hillary Clinton’s past and future factotum, famously decided that “yats” (Arseniy Yatseniuk)

should lead the putsch. And so, he did. Even stalwart purveyors of pro-regime propaganda like National Public Radio can't quite bring themselves to attribute this turn of events to pure coincidence.

Nobody knows what will happen next; the process is already out of control.

We can only hope that Obama doesn't get it into his head to revive anything like the bombing campaign Clinton conducted during the Kosovo phase of his Yugoslavia operation. Two decades ago, with Russia in a weakened condition, the United States could get away with that sort of thing; there would be no getting away with anything like that now.

The victims of American and European aggression in the former Yugoslavia – Serbians, primarily – were fodder for villainization. No matter that they were no worse than partisans on the sides that Clinton *et. al.* favored; they were bad enough.

And so, working mainly through "independent" media, America's propaganda apparatus perfected its ability to demonize peoples and leaders that come into its crosshairs.

Witness the rapidity with which Vladimir Putin went from being represented in the West as a vaguely comical strongman, obsessed with staging the Winter Olympics in Sochi, to someone whom Hillary Clinton, clueless as ever, unabashedly depicts as another Hitler.

This episode marks a new low not only for American diplomacy, but also for American media. When the two Bushes wanted to start wars, there was at least some acknowledgement that their purported justifications were debatable.

The media went along slavishly – especially in 2003, when George W was itching for a war against Iraq – but dissenting views were not simply ignored.

How could they have been? The whole world was mobilizing to stop Bush in his tracks. Even in the short run, the regime had a hard time pretending there was no dissent.

But when it comes to Russia – and Putin especially – the entire propaganda apparatus is on board. And while most people at some level know better, the Obama administration has seen to it that the public forum welcomes only views that accord with its own.

How can policies so transparently dangerous – and stupid – not give rise to intense opposition and outrage?

The short answer, I think, is that the War on Terror is just not enough.

The military-industrial complex President Eisenhower warned against more than half a century ago demands perpetual war or, better still, perpetual preparation for war.

To that end, the War on Terror – that is, on the Muslim world – doesn't quite cut it. The other side, the Muslim "other," won't hold up its end.

To be sure, in one form or another, that war can, and will, go on for as long as the United States continues to spread murder, mayhem and terror throughout the historically Muslim world.

So long as there are “terrorists” to fight, the war can go on; and the U.S. has become adept at keeping an adequate supply coming.

But, after all these years, the Bush-Obama War on Terror is getting old. Only unreconstructed islamophobes still have their hearts in it.

Everyone else is starting to balk at the cost, and the damage done to basic rights and liberties. The growing ranks of “wounded warriors” don’t help the War Party’s case either.

Corporations are starting to balk too because not enough of them are finding ways to cash in. Even for those that do, diminishing returns are setting in.

How much better a new Cold War would be! It would fatten the military-industrial complex more effectively and more broadly than any of the military concoctions of the Bush-Obama era. And, as long as the war remains cold, collateral damage would be diminished too, making a perpetual war regime easier to sustain.

The danger, of course, is that it will not remain cold. Back in the day, the world dodged that bullet – barely. But, on the whole, deterrence worked. The United States and the Soviet Union fought each other sometimes through Third World proxies. Most of the time, though, they did not fight each other at all.

Do Obama and his advisors really think that they can find a way to replicate that now?

They will have a hard enough time finding the pretexts they need. In 2001, Osama Bin Laden came to the aid of floundering neocons. Don’t count on Vladimir Putin or any other Russian – or Chinese – leader being so obliging.

Right now, American media are working night and day to attribute blame for the troubles in Ukraine to Putin’s territorial ambitions. It won’t work. The tale they tell is so transparently at odds with the facts that the pretense is bound to collapse.

The real story is just the opposite: the geopolitical ambitions of the United States and the EU account for the troubles in Ukraine. No amount of media chicanery can suppress this stubborn fact for long.

And, in any case, for a truly functional Cold War, a mere pretext is not enough. There has to be something like what the neocons tried to conjure up with their babble about a “clash of civilizations.”

After World War II and for several decades thereafter, anti-Communism served that purpose. But with Communism gone, an anti-Communist crusade can hardly be

revived. Moreover, as even Obama's foreign policy advisors are coming to understand, the last thing the U.S. needs is for an iron curtain to descend around the Muslim world.

A sustainable perpetual war regime would serve the needs of the one percent well; and it is the one percent that Obama aims to serve. But a war against the Muslim world, though easy enough to bring about and sustain, would destroy the world economy.

In the end, rational self-interest is bound to prevail over racial and religious animosities, and over any real or imagined civilizational divide.

This leaves Obama and his advisors with few choices.

They could, of course, seek peace; but the Nobel laureate is not about to do anything of the sort.

Or they could try to outdo Bill Clinton.

The problem with that is that Russia is not about to go the way of Yugoslavia. And even if it did, targeting it would not do much in the long run to satisfy corporate America.

What they want and need is an enemy like the Soviet Union of old, one that won't go away. A dismembered Russia – and China too? – would hardly serve that purpose.

Then what instead? Even leaders more clever than ours would have a hard time coming up with a satisfactory answer.

And so Obama and the others flay about in vain, unable to conjure up the enemy they want and think they need.

Theirs is a fool's errand.

But before that fact registers, they could do great, perhaps irreversible, harm.

The situation in Eastern Europe and especially in the former Soviet republics nowadays bears an eerie resemblance to the one that set off World War I a hundred years ago.

Nobody wanted that war either. But covert machinations and ill-conceived diplomatic maneuvering can cause situations to spin out of control. Obama, Clinton, Kerry and the rest evidently missed the day in school when that lesson was taught.

Folly similar to theirs gave rise to devastating consequences a century ago.

Imagine how much worse it would be now – in a nuclear age. Think of all the nuclear power plants and nuclear materials stored in Ukraine and other actual or potentially contested areas.

So much danger and so little resistance! Not that more resistance would matter much in the short run, in view of how little the will of the people determines what goes on in “democracies” like ours.

This is bound to change eventually, so long as people do not give up on democracy altogether.

The mounting resistance to 24/7 surveillance gives reason to hope that this will not be the case; as do increasingly frequent eruptions of democratic self-assertion. Occupy Wall Street is only the most conspicuous example so far.

But, for now, burdened with the leadership we have, our last best hope is that the wiser and more capable “foes” our government and media have taken it upon themselves to demonize will do their best to steer the course of events away from disaster. Let us hope that they succeed.