

# 'Group-Thinking' the World into a New War

**Exclusive:** The armchair warriors of Official Washington are eager for a new war, this time with Russia over Ukraine, and they are operating from the same sort of mindless “group think” and hostility to dissent that proved so disastrous in Iraq, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

If you wonder how the lethal “group think” on Iraq took shape in 2002, you might want to study what’s happening today with Ukraine. A misguided consensus has grabbed hold of Official Washington and has pulled in everyone who “matters” and tossed out almost anyone who disagrees.

Part of the problem, in both cases, has been that neocon propagandists understand that in the modern American media the personal is the political, that is, you don’t deal with the larger context of a dispute, you make it about some easily demonized figure. So, instead of understanding the complexities of Iraq, you focus on the unsavory Saddam Hussein.

This approach has been part of the neocon playbook at least since the 1980s when many of today’s leading neocons – such as Elliott Abrams and Robert Kagan – were entering government and cut their teeth as propagandists for the Reagan administration. Back then, the game was to put, say, Nicaragua’s President Daniel Ortega into the demon suit, with accusations about him wearing “designer glasses.” Later, it was Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega and then, of course, Saddam Hussein.

Instead of Americans coming to grips with the painful history of Central America, where the U.S. government has caused much of the violence and dysfunction, or in Iraq, where Western nations don’t have clean hands either, the story was made personal – about the demonized leader – and anyone who provided a fuller context was denounced as an “Ortega apologist” or a “Noriega apologist” or a “Saddam apologist.”

So, American skeptics were silenced and the U.S. government got to do what it wanted without serious debate. In Iraq, for instance, the American people would have benefited from a thorough airing of the complexities of Iraqi society – such as the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shiite – and the potential risks of invading under the dubious rationale of WMD.

But there was no thorough debate about anything: not about international law that held “aggressive war” to be “the supreme international crime”; not about the difficulty of putting a shattered Iraq back together after an invasion; not even about the doubts within the U.S. intelligence community about whether Iraq possessed usable WMD and whether Hussein had any ties to al-Qaeda.

All the American people heard was that Saddam Hussein was “a bad guy” and it was America’s right and duty to get rid of “bad guys” who supposedly had dangerous WMDs that they might share with other “bad guys.” To say that this simplistic argument was an insult to a modern democracy would be an understatement, but the propaganda worked because almost no one in the mainstream press or in academia or in politics dared speak out.

Those who could have made a difference feared for their careers - and they were “right” to have those fears, at least in the sense that it was much safer, career-wise, to run with the herd than to stand in the way. Even after the Iraq War had turned into an unmitigated disaster with horrific repercussions reaching to the present, the U.S. political/media establishment undertook no serious effort to impose accountability.

Almost no one who joined in the Iraq “group think” was punished. It turns out that there truly is safety in numbers. Many of those exact same people are still around holding down the same powerful jobs as if nothing horrible had happened in Iraq. Their pontifications still are featured on the most influential opinion pages in American journalism, with the New York Times’ Thomas L. Friedman a perfect example.

Though Friedman has been wrong again and again, he is still regarded as perhaps the preeminent foreign policy pundit in the U.S. media. Which brings us to the issue of Ukraine and Russia.

### **A New Cold War**

From the start of the Ukraine crisis in fall 2013, the New York Times, the Washington Post and virtually every mainstream U.S. news outlet have behaved as dishonestly as they did during the run-up to war with Iraq. Objectivity and other principles of journalism have been thrown out the window. The larger context of both Ukrainian politics and Russia’s role has been ignored.

Again, it’s all been about demonized “bad guys” - in this case, Ukraine’s elected President Viktor Yanukovich and Russia’s elected President Vladimir Putin - versus the “pro-Western good guys” who are deemed model democrats even as they collaborated with neo-Nazis to overthrow a constitutional order.

Again, the political is made personal: Yanukovich had a pricy sauna in his mansion; Putin rides a horse shirtless and doesn’t favor gay rights. So, if you raise questions about U.S. support for last year’s coup in Ukraine, you somehow must favor pricy saunas, riding shirtless and holding bigoted opinions about gays.

Anyone who dares protest the unrelentingly one-sided coverage is deemed a “Putin apologist” or a “stooge of Moscow.” So, most Americans - in a position to influence public knowledge but who want to stay employable - stay silent, just as they did during the Iraq War stampede.

One of the ugly but sadly typical cases relates to Russia scholar Stephen F. Cohen, who has been

denounced by some of the usual neocon suspects for deviating from the “group think” that blames the entire Ukraine crisis on Putin. The New Republic, which has gotten pretty much every major issue wrong during my 37 years in Washington, smeared Cohen as “Putin’s American toady.”

And, if you think that Cohen’s fellow scholars are more tolerant of a well-argued dissent, the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies further proved that deviation from the “group think” on Ukraine is not to be tolerated.

The academic group spurned a fellowship program, which it had solicited from Cohen’s wife, Katrina vanden Heuvel, because the program’s title included Cohen’s name. “It’s no secret that there were swirling controversies surrounding Professor Cohen,” Stephen Hanson, the group’s president, [told](#) the New York Times.

In a protest letter to the group, Cohen called this action “a political decision that creates serious doubts about the organization’s commitment to First Amendment rights and academic freedom.” He also noted that young scholars in the field have expressed fear for their professional futures if they break from the herd.

He mentioned the story of one young woman scholar who dropped off a panel to avoid risking her career in case she said something that could be deemed sympathetic to Russia.

Cohen noted, too, that even established foreign policy figures, ex-National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, have been accused in the Washington Post of “advocating that the West appease Russia,” with the notion of “appeasement” meant “to be disqualifying, chilling, censorious.” (Kissinger had [objected](#) to the comparison of Putin to Hitler as unfounded.)

In other words, as the United States rushes into a new Cold War with Russia, we are seeing the makings of a new McCarthyism, challenging the patriotism of anyone who doesn’t get into line. But this conformity of thought presents a serious threat to U.S. national security and even the future of the planet.

It may seem clever for some New Republic blogger or a Washington Post writer to insult anyone who doesn’t accept the over-the-top propaganda on Russia and Ukraine – much as they did to people who objected to the rush to war in Iraq – but a military clash with nuclear-armed Russia is a crisis of a much greater magnitude.

### **Botching Russia**

Professor Cohen has been one of the few scholars who was right in criticizing Official Washington’s earlier “group think” about post-Soviet Russia, a reckless and mindless approach that laid the groundwork for today’s confrontation.

To understand why Russians are so alarmed by U.S. and NATO meddling in Ukraine, you have to go back to those days after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Instead of working with the Russians to transition carefully from a communist system to a pluralistic, capitalist one, the U.S. prescription was “shock therapy.”

As American “free market” experts descended on Moscow during the pliant regime of Boris Yeltsin, well-connected Russian thieves and their U.S. compatriots plundered the country’s wealth, creating a handful of billionaire “oligarchs” and leaving millions upon millions of Russians in a state of near starvation, with a collapse in life expectancy rarely seen in a country not at war.

Yet, despite the desperation of the masses, American journalists and pundits hailed the “democratic reform” underway in Russia with glowing accounts of how glittering life could be in the shiny new hotels, restaurants and bars of Moscow. Complaints about the suffering of average Russians were dismissed as the grumblings of losers who failed to appreciate the economic wonders that lay ahead.

As recounted in his 2001 book, *Failed Crusade*, Cohen correctly describes this fantastical reporting as journalistic “malpractice” that left the American people misinformed about the on-the-ground reality in Russia. The widespread suffering led Vladimir Putin, who succeeded Yeltsin, to pull back on the wholesale privatization, to punish some oligarchs and to restore some of the social safety net.

Though the U.S. mainstream media portrays Putin as essentially a tyrant, his elections and approval numbers indicate that he commands broad popular support, in part, because he stood up to some oligarchs (though he still worked with others). Yet, Official Washington continues to portray oligarchs whom Putin jailed as innocent victims of a tyrant’s revenge.

Last October, after Putin pardoned one jailed oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, neocon Freedom House sponsored a Washington dinner in his honor, hailing him as one of Russia’s political heroes. “I have to say I’m impressed by him,” declared Freedom House President David Kramer. “But he’s still figuring out how he can make a difference.”

New York Times writer Peter Baker fairly swooned at Khodorkovsky’s presence. “If anything, he seemed stronger and deeper than before” prison, Baker [wrote](#). “The notion of prison as cleansing the soul and ennobling the spirit is a powerful motif in Russian literature.”

Yet, even Khodorkovsky, who is now in his early 50s, acknowledged that he “grew up in Russia’s emerging Wild West capitalism to take advantage of what he now says was a corrupt privatization system,” Baker reported.

In other words, Khodorkovsky was admitting that he obtained his vast wealth through a corrupt process, though by referring to it as the “Wild West” Baker made the adventure seem quite dashing and even admirable when, in reality, Khodorkovsky was a key figure in the plunder of Russia that impoverished millions of his countrymen and sent many to early graves.

In the 1990s, Professor Cohen was one of the few scholars with the courage to challenge the prevailing boosterism for Russia's "shock therapy." He noted even then the danger of mistaken "conventional wisdom" and how it strangles original thought and necessary skepticism.

"Much as Russia scholars prefer consensus, even orthodoxy, to dissent, most journalists, one of them tells us, are 'devoted to group-think' and 'see the world through a set of standard templates,'" wrote Cohen. "For them to break with 'standard templates' requires not only introspection but retrospection, which also is not a characteristic of either profession."

### **A Plodding Pundit**

Arguably, no one in journalism proves that point better than New York Times columnist Friedman, who is at best a pedestrian thinker plodding somewhere near the front of the herd. But Friedman's access to millions of readers on the New York Times op-ed page makes him an important figure in consolidating the "group think" no matter how askew it is from reality.

Friedman played a key role in lining up many Americans behind the invasion of Iraq and is doing the same in the current march of folly into a new Cold War with Russia, including now a hot war on Russia's Ukrainian border. In one typically mindless but inflammatory [column](#), entitled "Czar Putin's Next Moves," Friedman decided it was time to buy into the trendy analogy of likening Putin to Hitler.

"Last March, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was quoted as saying that Russian President Vladimir Putin's attack on Ukraine, supposedly in defense of Russian-speakers there, was just like 'what Hitler did back in the '30s' — using ethnic Germans to justify his invasion of neighboring lands. At the time, I thought such a comparison was over the top. I don't think so anymore."

Though Friedman was writing from Zurich apparently without direct knowledge of what is happening in Ukraine, he wrote as if he were on the front lines: "Putin's use of Russian troops wearing uniforms without insignia to invade Ukraine and to covertly buttress Ukrainian rebels bought and paid for by Moscow — all disguised by a web of lies that would have made Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels blush and all for the purpose of destroying Ukraine's reform movement before it can create a democratic model that might appeal to Russians more than Putin's kleptocracy — is the ugliest geopolitical mugging happening in the world today.

"Ukraine matters — more than the war in Iraq against the Islamic State, a.k.a., ISIS. It is still not clear that most of our allies in the war against ISIS share our values. That conflict has a big tribal and sectarian element. It is unmistakably clear, though, that Ukraine's reformers in its newly elected government and Parliament — who are struggling to get free of Russia's orbit and become part of the European Union's market and democratic community — do share our values. If Putin the Thug gets away with crushing Ukraine's new democratic experiment and unilaterally redrawing the borders of Europe, every pro-Western country around Russia will be in danger."

If Friedman wished to show any balance - which he clearly didn't - he might have noted that Goebbels would actually be quite proud of the fact that some of Hitler's modern-day followers are at the forefront of the fight for Ukrainian "reform," dispatched by those Kiev "reformers" to spearhead the nasty slaughter of ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine.

But references to those inconvenient neo-Nazis, who also spearheaded the coup last February ousting President Yanukovich, are essentially verboten in the U.S. mainstream media. So, is any reference to the fact that eastern Ukrainians have legitimate grievances with the Kiev authorities who ousted Yanukovich who had been elected with strong support from eastern Ukraine.

But in the mainstream American "group think," the people of eastern Ukraine are simply "bought and paid for by Moscow" - all the better to feel good about slaughtering them. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Seeing No Neo-Nazi Militias in Ukraine.](#)"]

We're also not supposed to mention that there was a coup in Ukraine, as the New York Times told us earlier this month. It was just white-hat "reformers" bringing more U.S.-sponsored good government to Ukraine. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[NYT Still Pretends No Coup in Ukraine.](#)"]

In his column, without any sense of irony or awareness, Friedman glowingly quotes Natalie Jaresko, Ukraine's new finance minister (leaving out that Jaresko is a newly minted Ukrainian citizen, an ex-American diplomat and investment banker with her own history of "kleptocracy.")

Friedman quotes Jaresko's stirring words: "Putin fears a Ukraine that demands to live and wants to live and insists on living on European values — with a robust civil society and freedom of speech and religion [and] with a system of values the Ukrainian people have chosen and laid down their lives for."

However, as I noted in December, Jaresko headed a U.S. government-funded investment project for Ukraine that involved substantial insider dealings, including \$1 million-plus fees to a management company that she also controlled.

Jaresko served as president and chief executive officer of Western NIS Enterprise Fund (WNISEF), which was created by the U.S. Agency for International Development with \$150 million to spur business activity in Ukraine. She also was cofounder and managing partner of Horizon Capital which managed WNISEF's investments at a rate of 2 to 2.5 percent of committed capital, fees exceeding \$1 million in recent years, according to [WNISEF's 2012 annual report](#).

In the 2012 report, the section on "related party transactions" covered some two pages and included not only the management fees to Jaresko's Horizon Capital (\$1,037,603 in 2011 and \$1,023,689 in 2012) but also WNISEF's co-investments in projects with the Emerging Europe Growth Fund [EEGF], where [Jaresko was founding partner and chief executive officer](#). Jaresko's Horizon Capital also managed EEGF.

From 2007 to 2011, WNISEF co-invested \$4.25 million with EEGF in Kerameya LLC, a Ukrainian brick manufacturer, and WNISEF sold EEGF 15.63 percent of Moldova's Fincombank for \$5 million, the report said. It also listed extensive exchanges of personnel and equipment between WNISEF and Horizon Capital.

Though it's difficult for an outsider to ascertain the relative merits of these insider deals, they involved potential conflicts of interest between a U.S.-taxpayer-funded entity and a private company that Jaresko controlled.

Based on the data from WNISEF's 2012 annual report, it also appeared that the U.S. taxpayers had lost about one-third of their investment in WNISEF, with the fund's balance at \$98,074,030, compared to the initial U.S. government grant of \$150 million. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[Ukraine's Made-in-USA Finance Minister](#)."] ]

In other words, there is another side of the Ukraine story, a darker reality that Friedman and the rest of the mainstream media don't want you to know. They want to shut out alternative information and lead you into another conflict, much as they did in Iraq.

But Friedman is right about one thing: "Ukraine matters." And he's even right that Ukraine matters more than the butchery that's continuing in Iraq.

But Friedman is wrong about why. Ukraine matters more because he and the other "group thinkers," who turned Iraq into today's slaughterhouse, are just as blind to the reality of the U.S. military confronting Russia over Ukraine, except in the Ukraine case, both sides have nuclear weapons.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)). 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](#).**