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“Intelligent people know that the empire is on the downhill”: A veteran CIA agent spills the goods on the Deep State and our foreign policy nightmares

After almost 30 years in the CIA, Ray McGovern became a truth-teller. He sits down with Salon for a long debriefing

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I first heard Ray McGovern speak on a country road in the New England hills. This was courtesy of the admirably dedicated David Barsamian, who broadcast one of McGovern’s talks on Alternative Radio in late-2013. Reception up here being spotty, I pulled over and sat watching the autumn clouds drift by for the full hour McGovern stood at the podium of a Methodist church in Seattle. I was rapt.

What a lost pleasure it is in our indispensable nation to be in the presence of someone who thinks, acts and speaks out of conscience and conviction. Even better, these were precisely McGovern’s topics that day three years back: The necessity of careful thought, of honoring one’s inner voice, of acting out of an idea of what is right without regard to success or failure, the win-or-lose of life. One way or another, these themes run through everything he has to say, I have

since discovered. At an inner-city church in Washington, McGovern teaches a course he calls “The Morality of Whistleblowing.”

Born in the Bronx in 1939 and educated at Fordham (and later Georgetown and Harvard), McGovern joined the Central Intelligence Agency during the Kennedy administration, when it was still possible to think sound, disinterested analysis out there in Langley, Virginia, could be a force for good. Long story short, as McGovern likes to say, he left 27 years later, by which time the scales had fallen, and founded Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity and Sam Adams Associates for Integrity in Intelligence—Adams being a former colleague and one of the whistle-blowers who paid his price. Not long before that AR speech, McGovern went to Moscow to give the recently exiled Edward Snowden one of his Sam Adams Awards. This is the ex-spook’s milieu: At 76, he dwells among the truth-tellers.

After many months trying to get our act together—or mine, I should say—I finally caught up with McGovern in Moscow late last year. We were both there for a conference on cross-border media and global politics sponsored by RT, the Russian variant of British Broadcasting. The venue was perfect: Russia has been McGovern’s focus since he earned his Fordham degrees. Russia, naturally, figured prominently in our exchange—along with American politics, the “deep state,” Syria and numerous other topics.

McGovern is approachable on the way to avuncular, as readers will see, but the preference for simplicity and plain speaking masks an impressive erudition. He is a linguist well read in several languages; his grasp of history, recent and otherwise, is thorough. He is an ecumenical Catholic whose frame of political reference is defined by nothing more exotic than the Constitution—a document he sees as having less and less bearing on what we do and how we live. I have rarely heard anyone of his intelligence and background use the “f” word when describing our national direction, and I do not refer to the carnal activity.

McGovern and I spoke at length in a Frenchified sitting room at the Metropol Hotel, famed seat of the Bolshevik government for a couple of years after the 1917 revolution. What follows is the first of two parts.

In the speech that eventually put us in this room together, you talked about Kennan [George Kennan, the noted diplomat and Princeton scholar] as a one-time hero of yours and then implied a change of mind—a certain, perhaps, betrayal—and noted that remarkable quotation: “We no longer have the luxury of altruism and world benefaction.... The day is not far off when we will have to deal in straight power concepts.”

Can you talk about Kennan as hero and then the betrayal you felt as the years went by? Does the quotation explain American conduct abroad today?

The respect I had for Kennan came from his earlier books and, of course, his writing from Moscow, where he pretty much invented containment policy. It appeared to me then that the Soviet Union was enlarging its area of control not only in Eastern Europe, but elsewhere. I thought he was right on target in explaining how to deal with the Russians. Being chief of the Soviet foreign policy branch at CIA in the ’70s, that was the Soviet Union I knew. It was always an amazing thing for me to think back, “Wow, we’re talking ’47 [when Kennan published his

famous “X” essay in Foreign Affairs, titled “The Sources of Soviet Conduct”] and here we are in ’77 or whatever. That’s a pretty good read on the way these people behave.”

At the same time, I had a respect and knowledge of Russian history. My master’s degree is in Russian studies, so I knew not only the language but a good bit of history. So it was kind of a love/hate relationship, where I had grown to know and respect the Russian people, they being very much like the Americans. When I was in Moscow, if I lost my way or needed directions, they’d get on the bus *with* me, for Pete’s sake! I felt sort of tormented by what had become of the rulers there.

I could understand through a glass dimly, why this was a natural reaction to what they saw President Truman and his successors do.

I think we could have done more—and could do more—to understand, from a Russian perspective, the sensation of being surrounded. This is to put the point too mildly.

If you know a little bit about Russian history, you’re aware that it’s a very sad history. It starts millennia behind other histories. People don’t know that the Slavic peoples who emerged from the area in and around Kiev and what is now Belorussia—they had no written language until the 9th century! A.D.!

Remarkable. Did they have an oral literature?

They had an oral literature. “Slovo o Polku Igoreve” [“The Song of Igor’s Campaign”] was one of their major epic poems. It rivals “The Odyssey” and “The Iliad.” It’s a really beautiful thing, except they had no way to set it down in writing. And so two Greek priests, Cyril and Methodius, go up in the 9th century, and they say, “These people are incredibly bright and prosperous. They’re prosperous—and this is kind of a mind leap for most people—because the Norse, from Norway and Sweden, traded with the East all the way to Istanbul by coming through the series of rivers of which the Dnieper [which flows through Russia and empties into the Black Sea] was one. A great deal of so-called civilization and some wealth had accrued there. So they go up there and they say, “Well, that sounds like *kai*. Let’s make that sound a *kai* (or “k”). That sounds like the Latin V. That one sounds like Hebrew. That one doesn’t sound like anything, so let’s manufacture a character for that.” And they put the [written] language together. This we call “Cyrillic,” of course.

In 988, Knyaz Vladimir, the prince of Kiev, decides that, now they have a language and now they can write down their liturgy, “Let’s become Christians.” This may be a little overstated, but it happened almost like this: One Sunday he said, “All right, everybody out into the river, we’re going to get baptized.” And now they’re part of the Western world—part of the Eastern Rite, of course, but still part of civilization all of a sudden.

You go straight to the point, Ray. There’s no understanding anything without a grasp of its history—which, of course, is the American failing over and over again.

Well, what happens next? The Mongol hordes invade Russia and stay for two centuries. Two centuries and 20 more years. We’re talking Genghis Khan, right? They live under what they call “the Tatar yoke” for those centuries. As we’re coming out of the Dark Ages into the Renaissance

in the West, they're still fighting major battles with the Tatars. They finally drive them out of European Russia, and what happens? In come the Swedes! In come the Lithuanians and the Hanseatic League!

So Ivan Grozny, Ivan the Terrible, was a pretty terrible guy, but at least he got those guys together and said, "Look, if we don't get rid of the Westerners we're going to be in deep *kimchi*. He probably said it a bit differently. [Laughs]

So they did, and finally Russia proper congealed around Moscow and later Petersburg.

My point is simply this: by the time Peter the Great came along at the very end of the 17th century, he's primed, he's going to be the czar, but he knows about the West. That's another little-known fact. Do you know what he does? He goes incognito down to the wharfs of Rotterdam and spends two years working on the wharfs just to see what it's like. He finds out, "Wow! This is a pretty neat place and they're pretty civilized." So he comes back and, of course, he overdoes it: "Everybody shave off the beard, and we're going to use scythes rather than sickles." So he has a lot of opposition, but by the time Catherine the Great comes [in 1762], when we're having our Revolution, she's able to consolidate Russia—all the way down to, and including, Crimea—for the first Russian port that was ice-free. Sevastopol, as you've heard about it in the news lately.

All I'm saying here is that when you appreciate Russian history—we haven't even gotten Napoleon and Hitler. It was mentioned just today, I've seen figures between 20 million and 27 million Russians perished when Hitler invaded.

I've understood 27 million.

Well, that's what Peter Kuznick [director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University] used today. I think the Russians say 26 million or 27 million. And the West seems oblivious to this. The supreme indignity, in my view, was on the celebration of D-Day this past June, 70 years after D-Day, there was some discussion as to whether we should invite the Russians. Can you imagine how the Russians felt about that?

"He who is insulted is not defiled. He who insults another is the one defiled."

Long story short, when we talk about Ukraine now, American history, in the media, begins on the 23rd of February, 2014, when, as the Washington Post headlined the article, "Putin had early plan to annex Crimea." What are they citing? There's a documentary out. Putin admits that he got his national security advisers around him on the 23rd.

That was just after the coup [the American-cultivated ouster of Viktor Yanukovich in Kiev].

It was the day after! So I say to my friends, some of whom are very well educated, what's wrong with that headline? What happened on the 21st? They really don't know! And these are educated people.

Anyhow, when I saw that happen, I said, “My goodness, not only is this a direct challenge to Russia, but it was sort of pre-advertised. They say the revolution will not be televised, well this coup was “YouTube-ized,” O.K.? Two and a half weeks before?

You mean the famous Vicky Nuland tape. [Nuland is Assistant Secretary for European Affairs; Geoffrey Pyatt is U.S. ambassador in Kiev.]

With the Victoria Nuland—Geoffrey Pyatt conversation, “Yats is the guy.” [Arsenyi Yatsenyuk, Nuland’s preference as premier.] I wake up the 23rd of February and turn on the radio to find out there’s been a coup in Kiev and who’s the new prime minister? Yatsenyuk! And he still is.

It all fit like a glove. Let’s finish with Kennan, your turn with Kennan.

What I would say about Kennan is he was an elitist. I met him a couple of times. His policies were racist. And this is in my view the original sin of the United States of America for lots of reasons.

The so-called Indians, the blacks—what a terrible record. He brought that forward. He said, in effect, “We are the indispensable country in the world, the *sole* indispensable country.” After World War II, we ended up with, as he put it, 50 percent of the natural resources of the world but only 6 percent of the population. What we had to do, of course, since we’re due a disproportionate amount of the riches of the world, we’ve got to pursue policies that are not sidetracked by altruistic things like human rights. We have to realize this is going to take hard power. That’s how he ended that policy proscription paper.

When I saw that I said, “I didn’t learn this in graduate school!” [Laughs] This really speaks volumes about how Kennan looked at the world. As bright as he was, he had this streak of exceptionalism. When I talk at colleges and universities I say, “Well, you know the president has said several times that we are the sole indispensable country in the world. Do you still do synonyms in this university? Do you do antonyms? So what’s the opposite of indispensable? Dispensable. So, by definition, all the other countries are dispensable. That, I think in retrospect, is what I see Kennan saying.

Ike [President Eisenhower] warning about the military-industrial complex. Once you get that kind of dynamic going and once you get the media enlisted in all this because the corporations that are profiteering on these wars are controlling the media in large measure, and then when you get the security complex building itself up, doubling and tripling in size since 9/11, what more do you need to create a system that is not very far from the classic definition of fascism? Do not blanch before the word.

Getting back to the Kennan quotation: “We no longer have the luxury of altruism or world benefaction. We must think in terms of straight power concepts.” Is it an adequate explanation of American conduct abroad today?

I see the same spirit of entitlement, the same undisguised feeling of superiority, but I also see a lot of fear.

I couldn’t agree with you more. Beneath the chest-out bravado, we’re a frightened people.

Yeah, I think intelligent people know that the empire is on the downhill. So how do we react? Well, we're not reacting well in a sense. [Laughs]

We find ourselves in Moscow. I wonder if you could reflect on U.S. ambitions today with regard to Russia. What do we want? To be honest, I rather fear your answer. What is our ultimate intent, given what I assume you agree to be an induced atmosphere of confrontation? Do we ultimately want what we call “regime change” here?

There are aspirations and then there are policies. I think we really can't talk in terms of a unitary policy being made by a government as headed by Obama. I do not see Barack Obama as being in control. I see him buffeted about, very inexperienced, advised by similarly inexperienced advisers on foreign policy, people who really don't know which end is up when it comes to Russia. And I see on the other side what we call the neocons. Those are the people who hate Russia.

When I was growing up in New York we used to play these big records. There was one record about Gene Autry. [Sings] *I'm a-rollin', I'm a-rollin'*. So on this one record this comic describes in Bronx vernacular what poor Gene Autry is heading into [in one of his movies]. He's going into this very dangerous area, you can tell by the rocks in the background that this is dangerous country because the Irigousa—Bronx dialect for Iroquois are there. Then the commentator says, “Do you know how much the Irigousa Indians hate Gene Autry? They hate him yet from *another picture!*” [Laughs] Well, the neocons hate the *Russians* yet from another picture.

How terrifically put. As I'm sure you know, a goodly proportion of Americans think—without thinking, of course—that the very conservative Putin is just the latest in a line of Communist leaders.

The Russians bailed out Obama when he was about to get involved in an open war with Syria at the end of August 2013 and the very beginning of September. [when Obama invoked his “red line” over the use of chemical weapons]. Now, there are a couple of things that saved the world from war at the time, but the Russian role was key. Putin and Obama had met at a summit in Northern Ireland a couple of months before, and Putin had said, “Look, we can help you on Syria. We've got real influence there. Let's talk about these things. As a matter of fact, you're worried about chemical weapons usage there? Let's get technical experts together and maybe we can work out something.”

What happens? On the 21st of August, 2013, there is a sarin gas attack outside Damascus. On the 30th John Kerry gets up and he's up before the State Department and says—35 times, you can count them, “It was Bashar al-Assad's government. Bashar al-Assad did these chemical attacks and we have to get him because the president said that we would if he crossed the red line on the use of chemical weapons.”

That's the 30th of August. On the 31st, the president has a news conference in the Rose Garden, and about 500 people, including myself, are out in front of the White House with signs saying “No Strike!” and “Don't bomb Syria!” We were making such a din that the president's news conference was delayed for 45 minutes. So he finally comes out, and we were fully expecting the worst. But we get word: He's not going to attack Syria! I was the next speaker up, and I couldn't believe it. So I said, “If this rumor is true...”

The president had changed his mind—overnight. I think I know how it happened. General Dempsey [Martin Dempsey, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff at this time], who had by then gotten not only a memo from us saying, “You promised. You testified before Congress that if you were ordered to start another war that you wouldn’t do it because it’s against the Constitution. We hold you to that promise and expect you to resign if you’re asked to.” I’m not sure we had much influence, but the British had gotten a sample of that sarin gas and realized, “My god, this isn’t the sarin in Syrian government stock.” It was homemade stuff. So they told Dempsey.

I wasn’t there, I’m not a fly on the wall, but I think Dempsey got to the president that evening and said, “Mr. President, this is a problem. We think you’ve been mousetrapped. It’s not the same sarin gas that the Syrian army has, and those U.N. inspectors who were conveniently there [in Damascus] when this happened on the 21st come back in two days, and everyone is going to ask me, ‘Could you not have waited two days for the inspectors to come back?’ And I’m going to have to say, ‘Beats the hell out of me. Go ask the president.’”

The president gets up in the Rose Garden and the first thing he says, “We’re in position to attack Syria, we’re all ready. But the chairman of the joint chiefs tells me that there’s no particular ‘time sensitivity’ to this operation. We could do it next week, the following week, next month. So I am going to go to Congress to ask for approval of this.”