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‘Merchants of Death’ Could Make a Lot of Money Off a War in Ukraine

William Greider
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Two of the first four Polish Air Force F-16 fighter jets, from Lockheed Martin, arrive at the Krzesiny airport in western Poland in 2006. (Reuters/Peter Andrews)

If you're wondering why some US politicians are so hot for war in the Ukraine, think "merchants of death." At the height of the antiwar movement, that was nasty label some of us applied to Lockheed Martin, Boeing and other major manufacturers of high-tech war-fighting equipment—planes, tanks, missiles, whatever does the job. When the drums of war are sounding in some distant land, these the weapons makers naturally smell sales opportunities.

Trouble in Ukraine has aroused the same ambitions and hawkish politicians have picked up the ball and are running with it. They are demanding that the US government send military stuff to Kiev to hold off threatening Russians (our favorite bad guys). The hawks are portraying President Obama as a wimp who's insufficiently bellicose. But the president is so far playing a cool hand. He has been getting us out of two wars. He's pretty sure the people don't want another one.

In fact, neutral historians may someday conclude that it was the United States who stirred up the trouble in the Ukraine, inadvertently if not intentionally, and that US arms makers played an important supporting role. When the Cold War ended in 1991, these companies saw a promising new market opening for their stuff—the newly liberated Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe. Let's expand NATO! The manufacturers lobbied policy makers in Washington and courted governments of post-Soviet nations as potential customers.

Bill Clinton decided to do it, cheered on by the arms merchants. Why is nobody talking about that? Because It might sound unpatriotic. And the media love bang-bang, even if the cause is stupid.

But expanding NATO to the east—even right up to Russian borders—was the provocative decision that led eventually to the current tensions and troubles. The Clinton administration determined that the United States must reach out and embrace the nations of Eastern Europe by offering them membership in the defense alliance originally created to hold off Soviet aggression. Expanding NATO, it was said, would guarantee the Communists could never reclaim their old dominance.

The decision would also sell a lot of fighter planes. Starting with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, the countries were delighted to be free of the old Warsaw Pact and eager to replace clunky old Soviet jet fighters with high-tech American versions—awesomely superior and also much more expensive. No problem, Washington would lend the money and guarantee the loans.

To sell this deal, the arms makers created the US Committee to Expand NATO. Its president was Bruce Jackson, director of strategic planning for Lockheed. Between 1996 and 1998 alone the six biggest military contractors spent \$51 million lobbying Congress and public opinion, according to *The New York Times*, while helping ethnic groups of Eastern European descent organize supporters.

Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, an opponent, called it "a Marshall Plan for defense contractors who are chomping at the bit to sell weapons and make profits." A congressional aide confided to *New York Times* reporter Katharine Seelye that the arms manufacturers were so intent on NATO expansion that "we'll probably be giving land-locked Hungary a new navy."

Starting with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, six nations from the old Soviet system have joined NATO, though not Ukraine. As allies, they are welcome to shop in the Western weapons market. Poland wanted forty-eight of Lockheed's F-16s fighter planes and five Hercules military transports. Romania wanted jet fighters to replace its tired old Russian MIGs. Bulgaria's defense minister said he was studying the probable purchase of F-16s. And so on.

American companies now practically "own" the international market in big-ticket armaments. According to Congressional Research Service reports, the US sales abroad were \$66 billion in 2011, more than three-fourths of all global trade. Russia finished second with \$4.8 billion. Those totals exaggerate the imbalance because the United States had an especially good year in 2011. There was a very large purchase from Saudi Arabia—\$33 billion for 84 F-15s and upgrades to seventy other planes.

Which brings us back to Ukraine. That troubled country actually manufactures some weapons itself and sells them to other countries, including India, Thailand and China. But as news stories have made clear, the Ukraine itself an unstable mess, its army small and feeble, its government corrupt and inept.

Nevertheless, twenty-one Republican senators—the usual crowd led by John McCain and Lindsey Graham—are hammering the Obama administration to get tough with Putin. Their rhetoric evokes nostalgia for "good old days" when the Cold War was in bloom.

"We need to inflict more direct consequences on Russia," declared Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, "prior to Vladimir Putin taking additional steps that will be very difficult to undo.... What we're saying is that Russia is winning."

Note that the senators do not actually propose to send American troops into the Ukraine, though the United States has deployed fighter planes to Poland and US ships to the Black Sea. The bill they introduced would send \$100 million in direct military aid, anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons. Plus, their legislation would designate Ukraine as a "major non-NATO ally," which would give a green light to arms sales.

But isn't Ukraine already broke? No matter, we will lend them the money. People who remember such moments from the distant past know where this tough talk leads. When the rhetoric fails to intimidate the bad guys, the United States defends its reputation by raising the stakes—deeper and deeper into the big muddy.

The real tragedy of Ukraine is that American policy leaders, from Bush I and Clinton to Bush II and Obama, seem to have forgotten the true history of big wars across the twentieth century. After World War I, the victors chose to punish the vanquished Germans, imposing harsh and impossible penalties that sowed a bitter desire for revenge and that led ultimately to World War II.

After that war, however, the great powers led by the United States did the opposite. Instead of vengeance, they chose to rebuild the devastated nations of Japan and Germany and help restore them to strength and pride.

This time, American leaders reverted to the old pattern—throwing more pain and indignities in Russia's path. Imposing the ideas of Washington and Harvard, US governing elites allowed the plundering oligarchs to strip public asset. US economic policy squeezed the country tight while the Russian people endured an epic depression that triumphant Americans barely noticed. That was a dumb thing to do. It was also dangerous, as our history has taught.

Now comes Vladimir Putin seeking revenge—or at least restored national pride. He said his country was demeaned and humiliated, deliberately taunted by the encircling NATO alliance. You don't have to like him to recognize he is right about that.