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When Empires Collide: Honesty and Resistance Begin at Home

By Scott Tucker

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Armed shock troops in key cities of Ukraine may yet provoke a civil war. Ukraine is now a disputed territory between two oligarchic regimes, one based in Ukraine and the other in the Russian Federation. But there is also a collision of imperial spheres of interest in this region. Some leftists shy away from condemning the Eurasian imperialism of Vladimir Putin's regime. Likewise, some conservatives refuse to acknowledge the imperial projects of the United States and NATO.

There is no shame in confessing ignorance. Unless we have visited the region, or know both Russian and Ukrainian, the vast majority of people in the United States are at a great disadvantage. Yet we can search out translations and make the effort to go beyond the headlines and broadcasts of the mass media. If we are committed to the defense of human rights and civil liberties across all national borders, then we should be worried about the rise of right-wing nationalism and neo-fascism in Europe. All the same, the United States has violated human rights and international law so often around the globe that its role in the Ukrainian crisis should be unsurprising.

Certainly Putin's seizure of the Crimean peninsula deserves condemnation, but his motives involve his own reasons of state. Among those motives, two seem paramount. First, the Russian

Federation gains greater naval and commercial dominance over the oil and gas of the Black Sea. Second, Putin makes a geopolitical move on the global chessboard that is provocative, but he thereby underscores the provocations of the United States and NATO. The ever-encroaching encirclement of the Russian Federation by U.S. and NATO military bases is one kind of imperial “pragmatism,” from the perspective of Washington. If this Bismarckian chess game is good enough for the Western powers, then why not for an emperor of Eurasia? We may detest Putin (I do), but we should not allow the passing holograms of “hope and change” in the White House to do our thinking for us. So let’s consider the plain words of a former KGB agent who now leads the Russian Federation:

“I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: Against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our Western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them.”

Those words are from Putin’s speech on Feb. 12, 2007, at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy. And who remembers his words now? If we prefer daily doses of mass-mediated propaganda from the White House and the State Department instead, then we are choosing our own state system of “organized lying”—I borrow Orwell’s words—over any other, presumably because we judge, on balance, that there is more truth embedded within the propaganda of Washington than there is in the propaganda of Moscow. Let’s just grant that judgment here (though the matter is not so simple), and go back nevertheless to Putin’s message. Was he entirely in the wrong?

In that case we have come perilously close to an entirely opposed geopolitical judgment. The expansion of U.S. and NATO bases is then only the next chapter in a Cold War that may grow hot, with all of the old ideological reflexes in working order but with improved weapons of mass destruction. Our empire is better than their empire. Ours is worth fighting for and theirs is not. No wonder Prince Charles compared Putin to Hitler, and no wonder Hillary Clinton recently stated, “Now if this sounds familiar, it’s what Hitler did back in the ’30s. ... All the Germans that were ... the ethnic Germans, the Germans by ancestry who were in places like Czechoslovakia and Romania and other places, Hitler kept saying they’re not being treated right. I must go and protect my people, and that’s what’s gotten everybody so nervous.”

A land grab by any nation is definitely cause for worry. Not, of course, if the land was grabbed long ago from Indians and Mexicans by white Protestants guided by Divine Providence. Not, apparently, if islands off the coast of Argentina were grabbed more recently by the British navy under the command of then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. In the first case, the land grab was too big to give back now; and in the second case, the land grab is too small to bother anyone except those killjoy anti-imperialists. Visitors to Argentina might remember, however, to refer to the Falkland Islands as Las Malvinas.

Human history is a vast geography of injustice, and many lines drawn on maps cost torrents of blood. Archaeologists labor in layers of ash, ruins, bones and the buried evidence of the most noble and ignoble causes, all thrown together in mortal chaos. Unfair but all too human, unless we decide the human species deserves a better history.

But that is not quite the point Hillary Clinton was making when she suggested that Hitler's seizure of the Sudetenland was an imperial overture to World War II. Indeed it was, and to the degree we can still choose to avoid World War III we might labor to defeat the imperial designs of the ruling class within our own borders. After all, we know that ruling class best, and we have greater practical power to wage class-conscious campaigns against corporate parties and career politicians close to home. That hardly means we turn our backs on the project of class-conscious solidarity across all national borders. But we make a beginning first and foremost in our own workplaces and neighborhoods.

We can question the integrity of Ukrainian elections, compromised both by homegrown corruption and meddling from Moscow, but we might do so with some humility. In the United States' presidential election of 2000, the Supreme Court denied a recount of crucial votes in Florida. Despite the vituperation against Ralph Nader's campaign from the apparatchiks of the Democratic Party, the fact remains that Nader had the right to run and gain a share of votes in any democracy worthy of the name. The orchestrated partisan rancor against Nader was also a sly distraction, so that the Green Party could be blamed for the failures of the Democratic Party.

Al Gore, however, would have won the presidency if he had only won his own home state of Tennessee. He was a lackluster candidate well within the corporate consensus of the Clintonistas. Then again, Gore ignores the inconvenient truth that capitalists burn down the planet because they can, and because capitalist politicians such as Gore can't stop them. George McGovern of South Dakota had been the first presidential candidate to lose his own home state in his presidential run of 1972, but to his credit, McGovern was a candidate of peace and justice. Even McGovern was trapped in the bogus pragmatism of bipartisan capitalism, which guarantees the flaming downward spiral of the republic. If you're going to lose a presidential campaign, why not lose with a message that wins the best chance for independent political action and for democratic socialism?

More recently, Supreme Court decisions have ratified unlimited corporate donations to political parties and candidates, under the doctrines that money is a form of free speech and that corporations are invested with legal personhood. The division of powers, which always seemed one of the better features of the American Constitution, is thus subject to the law of historical irony. The "independent judiciary," and more specifically a majority of nine Supreme Court justices, now labors for a supreme injustice against the republic—namely, turning Congress into the front office of the ruling class. If we, the people, cannot overrule the ruling class in fair elections, then it's time for a new American Revolution. A peaceful revolution, so far as possible, but never forget that the ruling class also gets a "vote" for violence in that event.

The corporate parties are parties of war and empire. Not because each and every CEO is a convinced militarist and imperialist, but because the corporate system is not, in fact, about personhood. The corporate state operates as an enforcer of wage slavery, and as an extractive

industry on a global scale. A horde of hipsters laboring at the computer screens of Fortune 500 companies will not change that brute fact, even if they stencil portraits of Mahatma Gandhi on their T-shirts. They may even be Eurocommunists, but it makes no difference if they vote by rote for Demopublicans in every big election. Remember the apostle of hope and change who gave us an expansion of drone wars and the surveillance state? Thank God he was not a Republican. And if Hillary Clinton breaks the glass ceiling of the presidency for women, she will still remain a “public servant” of the ruling class. That Machiavellian advertises herself as a Methodist. Hilarious.