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National Endowment for Empire *Democracy Promotion Means Regime Change*

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“Democracy” may be the most loosely defined word in the English language today. Gone are the Hitler and Stalin-like revilers of democracy. Now it’s just about everybody’s favorite form of government, though there are markedly differing views on what exactly it is. The Washington-based National Endowment for Democracy provides one example. Founded in 1983 to enhance US foreign policy by teaching aspects of democracy abroad, it now spends 100 million dollars a year of American taxpayers’ money on projects that are not always appreciated by recipients who complain that they are not so much democratic as interventionist. They may seek a regime change that is not desired by the people who are supposed to benefit.

Take Ukraine, where the NED financed no less than sixty-five projects to arouse opposition to President Viktor Yanukovich, who had offended by seeming to draw away from the European Union and move closer to Russia. But wait! He had been elected to the presidency in an election considered free and fair in 2010. Was NED violating its own principles by encouraging a regime

change correctly called a coup? Hardly the first time, say critics. It's been an NED habit over the years. Politics come first, democracy a distant second.

NED occupies an envious position. Though government funded, it operates with little in the way of oversight. Amid the many voices projecting US foreign policy – the White House, State Department, Defense Department, Congress – it can be heard above others because it speaks forcefully with ideological assurance. It is indeed the voice of the neo-conservatives who recommend US military intervention wherever it can be employed with special attention to the needs of Israel. Explains Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State and chairman of the National Democratic Institute, an offshoot of NED: “We stand tall, and thus see further than other nations. We are the indispensable nation.” Is a name change in order perhaps? The National Endowment for Empire.

So the neocons of NED decided that Ukraine must be an adjunct of empire. In this they have been ably assisted by their counterparts in the State Department, especially Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs and wife of neocon guru Robert Kagan, who still defends the 2003 neocon-inspired war against Iraq which laid waste that country. In fact, NED has provided refuge for neocons discredited by their instigation of the war. Writes investigative reporter Robert Parry: “That steady flow of NED funding gave the neocon movement the staying power that other foreign policy viewpoints lacked.” Bureaucracy to the rescue.

Nuland was close enough to the anti-government protesters in Ukraine to hand out cookies to them on the street, democratically distributed no doubt. Once they violently achieved power, she carefully appraised appointments. When the European Union had some different thoughts on the matter, she expostulated on the phone to the cooperative US Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt: “Fuck the EU.” These may well be the most memorable words to emerge from the Ukraine imbroglio, eclipsing even “democracy.”

Proud of its engagement with Ukraine, although complicated by the intense Russian reaction, the National Democratic Institute led a 38-member delegation to Ukraine to celebrate new elections on May 25. Heading the group was empire-minded Madeleine Albright, who hadn't exactly burnished her democratic credentials when she was asked on CBS-TV if the US sanctions on Iraq were worth it since they had led to the deaths of half a million children. Yes, she replied. “We think the price is worth it.” Empire first, children second.

People abroad understandably confuse NED policies with those of the US Government, but they aren't necessarily the same. Neocons, to be sure, have considerable influence in the Obama White House, but it may not be decisive. Their ultimate target is Putin with Ukraine a crucial step toward that goal. NED is now spending eight million dollars a year to educate Russians in democracy with half a million allotted to "increase political competition in Russia." NED President Carl Gershman wrote in the Washington Post: "Ukraine's choice to join Europe will accelerate the demise of the ideology of Russian imperialism that Putin represents. Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself." NED's very personal agenda. On all accounts, get Putin. The possible consequences for Russia, the world? Incidental to true ideologues.

Not as acquiescent to the neocons as some Americans, Putin showed no appetite for demise and responded to the Ukrainian coup by swiftly annexing Crimea. An outraged Zalmay Khalilzad, a member of the NED governing board, demanded more democratic action: "The United States should impose further sanctions against Russian officials, increase support to regional allies (including the restoration of American missile defense commitments and the movement of NATO forces into Eastern Europe), provide military assistance to the Ukrainian government and arm forces to resist a Russian occupation of Eastern Ukraine." NED for World War Three.

Trouble is the White House may have something else in mind. President Obama continues to conflict with Putin over Ukraine, but the Russian's help is needed in other parts of the world. Like it or not, Russia remains a substantial power not to be ignored. Professing his liking for Obama, Putin helped save him from a disastrous war in Syria by persuading President Hafez al-Assad to give up his chemical weapons, thereby infuriating the neocons bent on war. Putin has sent military aid to Iraq and Syria, joining the US effort to combat the extremist Islamic State that is threatening the region. Russian advisers are returning peacefully to Afghanistan to contribute to a postwar settlement. Russians as peaceniks under the pugnacious Putin? What a blow to combat-ready NED.

Pressed by the neocons within and without the White House – Hillary Clinton is one – Obama, an indecisive leader at best, has failed to make a case for reaching an understanding with Russia and for devising a general strategy useful to the US, if not to the unelected NED. It's significant that the American people flooded Congress with objections to going to war with Syria when the President was on the verge of it. This expression of democracy should better serve US foreign policy than the clearly undemocratic NED. Its elimination, in fact, would not be a loss but a boon to America's relations with the world.

