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America's New Demons and the Second Coming of the Neocons

By Andrew Levine
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The horror of a Clinton v. Trump election is making everybody who pays attention a little crazy. Not paying attention isn't easy – not with everybody hooked into social (actually anti-social) media and with “news” and commentary coming from every direction.

The hypocrisy is breathtaking. In the midst of it all, the American propaganda system, the one that supposedly doesn't exist, has gone berserk — targeting RT America (formerly Russia Today).

Anyone who relies on *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post* or NPR or, worse, CNN or MSNBC, to find out what's shaking – or rather what the guardians of the status quo want people to think is shaking (and “fit to print”) — and who also has access to RT America on satellite TV or a handful of cable stations, or who goes to the trouble of watching it over the internet, will know what I mean.

RT America is a better source for news and commentary than America's finest by many orders of magnitude. It is less biased too.

The Russian government funds it, but this doesn't make its output propaganda – not unless anything funded by governments is propaganda by definition. RT America is more like the BBC or CBC than, say, Radio Free Europe.

The New York Times and the others, NPR excepted, get no government funding; their money comes from advertisers. They therefore spew out truckloads of commercial propaganda. NPR does too – not according to legal fictions of their own contrivance, according to which advertisers become “underwriters,” but in effect.

The American public, comprised of individuals taught from birth to venerate the invisible hand of the market and to derogate the visible hand of the state, doesn't hold that against them. This is one reason why the idea that America's “free press” is a propaganda system goes against the grain.

But “by their fruits, ye shall know them.” The only way to deny that America's free press produces propaganda is, again, by definition.

This always becomes clear in time; when it no longer matters. For example, the anti-Communist propaganda of the 1950s, a staple of respectable media outlets at the time, nowadays seems like a total and complete hoot.

If the world survives ecological catastrophe and Hillary Clinton's wars, it will be the same, in due course, with the respectable news and commentary of the present period.

To be sure, journalists working inside the corporate media ambit still do important work; and the muckraking tradition, the glory of American journalism, isn't dead even there. Also, corporate news outlets can be, and often are, critical of American governments.

But there are topics of monumental importance that are taboo because powerful interests with political connections insist on it.

Also whistle-blowing journalism of a kind that could embarrass prominent guardians of the status quo is ignored whenever possible, and whistle-blowers are villainized when ignoring them is impossible. Julian Assange of WikiLeaks is the most prominent example, but there are many others. Ask Edward Snowden or Chelsea Manning or Thomas Drake or John Kiriakou, among countless others.

But even allowing for what we have come to regard as normal, the depiction of RT America as a slicker version of what Americans think Soviet era propaganda mills were like back in the day is truly remarkable.

It is especially galling when *The Washington Post* takes the lead.

Whenever, of late, the money interests that feed most Americans the news find it expedient to concoct or ratchet up some propagandistic narrative, count on the *Post* to be there front and center, doing all it can to promote the cause. In this respect, if in no other, it is *primus inter pares*, first among equals

Towing the line is about the only thing its columnists are good for.

For reviving fifties-style “free world” propaganda without the hoot, Anne Applebaum is always at the ready. But she is hardly alone. Even the “liberals” – Dana Milbank, for example, or David Ignatius, Eugene Robinson and E. J. Dionne – can be counted on too to do yeoman's service for what Bolsheviks used to call “the general line,” whatever it happens to be at the time. For unadorned servility, though, look first at other sections of the paper. I.F. Stone once said that you had to read the whole *Post* through, because you'd never know where a front-page story might be found. The owners are different now, but some things never change.

For instance, so far, the most sustained – and also the silliest – attack on RT America that the *Post* has published appeared in the Style Section last Saturday, September 10, in a piece co-authored by Adam Taylor and Paul Farhi about Larry King’s interview of Donald Trump. It was broadcast over RT America.

Anyone curious about the general line on Russia and Vladimir Putin, as of last week, can find it all, neatly encapsulated, right there.

That corporate media – all of them, not just *The Post* – have it in for RT America is revealing.

Envy may have something to do with it; RT America puts the best they have to offer to shame. But there is no point in dwelling on that; skeptics can just read what our media write or hear what they say and then compare and contrast.

It is always important to point out how corporate media invert reality, but this isn’t exactly news.

The point has been made countless times over many decades; the evidence is overwhelming.

It is news, though, when the ways it comes to pass are especially revealing. This latest episode is one of those times.

The Trump interview itself was unremarkable; the issue was that it aired over an outlet funded by the Russian government.

Most Americans have never heard of RT America. How could they; the propaganda system ignores it, few cable providers carry it, and mainstream talking heads don’t talk about it. But with Trump involved, ignoring its existence was out of the question.

And so, vilification ensued. The media won’t keep it up, unless they have to; they’d rather keep RT America out of sight and out of mind. Time will tell if this demon has legs.

Whether it does or not, the incident is worth discussing — because the demonizers, unwittingly and perhaps still without realizing it, provided a clear line of sight into three of the most salient pathologies of the current political scene.

Pathology #1: The Demonization Imperative

There is nothing distinctively current about this one; at least since World War II, the regime has relied on demonic enemies to scare citizens into rallying behind it. Where they don’t exist readymade, it has created them.

[To be clear, I am using the word “regime” in the way that is normal in non-propagandistic political theory: to designate political economic systems. Corporate media use the term differently: to refer disparagingly to governments that are out of favor with Washington. For them, the government of Syria is a “regime”; the governments of allies and client states of the United States, much less of the United States itself, never are. In my usage, none of them are regimes, strictly speaking; but, as governments, all of them are integral parts of the regimes they superintend.]

In the United States, while the Cold War was on, it was easy to scare up support for the regime; Godless Atheistic Communism could always be trotted out.

This was becoming difficult, however, even before Mikhail Gorbachev made the chicanery behind Ronald Reagan’s “evil empire” babble visible for all to see.

By the time that the Communist order in Russia and Eastern Europe ended in 1989, Communism was already defunct, and the Russian people, an alarming number of them anyway, had gotten religion. By 1991, when the Soviet Union itself imploded, the Godless Atheistic Communism of the classical Cold War period had become a dead letter.

Unwittingly and fatally, Saddam Hussein, an on-again off-again Middle Eastern asset of the American empire, came to the rescue – by invading Kuwait and suffering an ignominious defeat there at the hands of America’s “coalition of the willing.”

Perhaps emissaries of Bush the Father planted the idea of taking over Kuwait in his mind and goaded him on; perhaps he thought of it all by himself, and had no need of encouragement.

Whatever the case, though defeated, he remained in office; Bush insisted on it. Evidently, the father understood what the son and the son's de facto regent, Dick Cheney, did not – that ending Saddam's rule would lead to chaos followed by disaster.

That Saddam was just what the doctor ordered, a vicious autocrat who could be portrayed as a fearsome boogeyman, was an additional benefit.

For an entire decade, as the Clinton Administration subjected the Iraqi people to a murderous sanctions regime responsible for the premature deaths of more than half a million people, Saddam came to occupy the role formerly played by the Communist "menace."

He had rivals just as loathsome — Osama Bin Laden, for example – but, thanks to effective propaganda, even he was not as scary to most Americans as Saddam in his prime. This suited the Bush family; they had unfinished business with him and his "regime."

Even so, Bin Laden nearly edged Saddam out of the top spot after 9/11. He was better boogeyman material.

And so, Bush the Younger, urged on by Cheney, finished Saddam off – taking care of family business while keeping the boogeyman slot filled.

One wonders whether the War Party actually thought it through: by doing Saddam in, they were depriving themselves of a demonic figure whose usefulness was well established.

Evidently, killing off useful enemies is a mistake to which second- and third-rate politicians are prone: think, for example, of Hillary Clinton and Muammar Gaddafi.

The difference is that Bush's "mission accomplished" was plain stupid, even considering the source; while Hillary's "we came, we saw, he died" provided a glimpse into the moral rottenness inherent in the "humanitarian interventionist" soul.

As the years wore on, it became clear even to the most terrified Americans that Osama Bin Laden, holed up in some remote quarter of the world, had long ago shot his wad. His usefulness was waning.

And so, with the 2012 election looming, Barack Obama found it expedient to call on the Navy Seals, his very own Murder Incorporated, to kill the boogeyman of the day. He then called on his "public diplomacy" flacks to make it look like a well-executed heroic caper which, we now know, it was not.

Poor Obama. Poor Madam Secretary Clinton. Propaganda systems abhor a vacuum and, by having Bin Laden killed, that is just what they brought about.

This time, there was no Saddam Hussein at the ready; and, in today's world, good serviceable demons are hard to find.

Well, not actually; there are more than enough out there. The problem is that they are out of bounds.

In a more just possible world, Benjamin Netanyahu would make a fine demon; and his cabinet is full of ethnic cleansers even more noxious than he. However, in the actual world, the Prime Minister of Israel owns Congress — and no matter how flagrantly he disses the American President, Obama is too timid to put him in his place, notwithstanding the fact that Obama holds all the cards.

On the merits, Netanyahu *et. al.* could fill just about any demon's shoes — but this isn't going to happen as long as America's political class has any say.

Democrats and Republicans actually compete to see which party can provide the Israeli military with larger aid packages. Presently, that ethnocratic settler state gets some \$3.1 billion a year.

Obama wanted to raise the amount over the next ten years, starting with \$3.3 billion in 2018. Republican Lindsey Graham, Chairman of the Senate appropriations subcommittee that oversees the foreign affairs budget thought that wasn't enough, and therefore held up the deal.

Now, the deal is done. Israel will get \$38 billion over the next ten years, a military aid package unprecedented in American and world history. Amazing!

Netanyahu benefits from an American accent and an American high school and university education; and he appoints Americans to be his emissaries in the United States. No wonder he is beloved by the likes of Lindsey Graham. Other potential demons are not so fortunate. Arabs are especially unlucky – or, rather, they would be, but for oil money.

Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies are led by reactionary autocrats every bit as loathsome as Netanyahu, and even more inclined to violate basic principles of political morality. Their leaders are demons right out of central casting. But their fortunes are so tightly intertwined with the fortunes of leading American capitalists that even without the functional equivalent of an Israel lobby, the propaganda system cannot touch them.

Vladimir Putin is another story.

Barack Obama knows better, of course; Putin has gotten him out of several jams that his Clintonesque advisors got him into.

Donald Trump knows better too; he is onto something when he praises Putin's strength and contrasts it with Obama's weakness.

But this is hardly the point. Putin is more autocratic, and less "politically correct," than Obama; and Trump is not the only "deplorable" American who likes that sort of thing.

But unlike many of the diplomats Obama and his former Secretary of State empowered, he does have some idea how diplomacy works and some strategic acumen.

He also has more respect for international law than any American president, including Obama, has shown in a long time.

International law proscribes wars of aggression; as is often said, this is its most fundamental principle. Thus, in the media narrative of Western countries, the most egregious example of Putin's villainy is the war of aggression he supposedly launched against Ukraine.

The reality is different, of course; the United States and other Western countries have been hard at work trying to bring Ukraine into the American sphere of influence; and the Russian reaction has been largely, though not entirely, defensive. But the demonizers are not about to let pesky facts stand in their way.

Neither will corporate media outlets point out that Nobel Laureate Obama has initiated at least four such wars – against Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Somalia – and continued others in Iraq and Afghanistan.

No matter: Putin is the bad guy, while Obama, as an American, is, as if by definition, on the side of the angels.

There is no denying that Putin has a despicable side: he is a capitalist backslider; and, while he probably never had anyone poisoned or irradiated, as Western propagandists claim, he is not as fastidiously respectful of the rule of law in his dealings with domestic enemies as he is in international affairs.

Even so, compared to Netanyahu or Salman, the Saudi King, he is an angel. And he is certainly no worse than many of the American empire's dearest allies around the world.

In any case, Putin's demonizable qualities have little to do with the reasons for his demonization.

Somebody has to be the boogeyman, and there aren't many serviceable candidates around. However, to account for the fact that Putin has lately become the demon *du jour*, it is necessary to look beyond that one exigency.

Pathology #2: The Second Coming of the Neocons

Henry (Scoop) Jackson, the Democratic Senator from Washington state — or, as they used to say, from the Boeing Corporation — was the spiritual father of the neoconservative movement. Before his death in 1983, he was an aggressive promoter of the military and the industries that depend upon it, and an enthusiastic Cold Warrior. He was also one of the most ardent Zionists in official Washington. He had no need to pass these values on to his spiritual heirs; they already had them in abundance.

Throughout the eighties and nineties, those heirs, no longer Democrats and never entirely out of favor, bided their time, cultivating their ties with leading Republicans — like Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney.

Thanks in part to those hook ups, their moment came with the War on Terror. For the better part of the Bush era, they pretty much got their way.

Upon taking office, Obama ought to have purged the government of their influence. He tried, but only half-heartedly. Some of the more prominent neocons retreated back into the rightwing thank tanks from whence they came, but their epigones lingered on.

A neocon aim was to reduce Russia to a third-rate power. They very nearly got their wish in the Yeltsin days, not because of anything they did or got the American government to do, but because Russia's embrace of capitalism was so ill-conceived, historically retrograde, abrupt, and graceless.

Now, all that is ancient history. As was bound to happen, Russian power eventually revived — enough to make it once again a credible geopolitical rival of the United States, and an impediment in the American empire's way.

To keep America dominant, neocons championed the idea of bringing NATO right up to Russia's borders — first by incorporating the Soviet Union's former Eastern European "satellites" into its fold, and then by doing its best to do the same with former Soviet republics.

This was all in plain violation of a promise Reagan had made to Gorbachev, but so what! All is fair in love (not a neocon concern) and war.

Western efforts to bring Ukraine into NATO's ambit exemplify the neocon strategy perspicuously.

The prevailing Western narrative has it that Russia — led by the evil Putin — is behind all the trouble there. In time, of course, it will become plain that compared to the State Department's machinations, the Kremlin's role has been barely discernible; that, again, the American propaganda system has turned reality on its head. By then, though, it may be too late; it generally is.

Pathology #3: Hillary

There is something very wrong with a political system capable of making Donald Trump the second most likely person to become President of the United States. His chances are practically nil, but everyone else's chances are even worse.

Hillary's chances are excellent — all she has to do is remain ambulatory, and maybe not even that. There is something very wrong with that too.

Hillary, who began her political life as a Goldwater Girl, seems to have harbored neocon inclinations from Day One: certainly, from long before a self-identified neo-conservative ideology took shape.

The way she tells her story, she became a “progressive pragmatist” in college; never quite a radical, but close. Leftwing radicalism was cool when she was at Wellesley and Yale Law School; Cold War anti-Communism was not.

This changed in the Reagan years, and so did Hillary. It was not just a matter of remaining “viable within the system,” as our future First Husband famously put it. As First Lady of a conservative Southern state, she could hardly afford to rumple a whole lot of feathers.

Hillary was not about to revert to her pro-Goldwater days either. But in the brave new world of Reagan’s America, she could give her fondness for views she held in High School freer rein.

The War on Terror brought the neocons to power, but their view of the world had been gaining ground since the seventies, and it continued to gain ground even as Obama took over from Cheney and Bush.

Now, when Hillary takes over from Obama; Cheney will, at last, have a successor. Therefore, worry! A neocon President, surrounded by neocon advisors, is a disaster waiting to happen.

Russia, after all, is a nuclear power. Trump has the impulse control of a teenager; no sane person would want his hand on the button. But Hillary is easily as dangerous – not because her temperament is off, but because her politics is.

The fear is not just that she will revive the Cold War; it is already revived. It is that, by provoking Russia, she will turn the Cold War hot.

Reagan was a doddering flyweight, but at least he knew enough to steer clear of policies calculated to provoke the Russian bear. Even Scoop Jackson understood that. Jackson’s spiritual heirs are more reckless.

Fortunately, when Cheney and therefore George W. Bush were in their pocket, the United States was too distracted by Afghanistan and Iraq to move forthrightly into the abyss.

Americans are more used to perpetual war now.

If only President Drone could stay on! Hillary is closer in spirit to Cheney than to the man who was daft enough to make her his Secretary of State. The world will miss his irresolution.

Could it be that Hillary enjoys playing with fire? Or is she simply oblivious to the dangers?

Whatever the answer, demonizing Russia’s leader comes naturally to her, just as glorifying his “strength” comes naturally to Trump.

If any Democrat could lose to Trump, Hillary is the one; she is that inept. Team Hillary, along with Hillary’s many lesser evil supporters, must realize this at some (not entirely conscious) level. What else could explain their push to identify the Donald with the demon of the hour?

Hillary can get a lot of mileage out of running against Trump. And insofar as the public identifies Trump with the man the propaganda system has turned into Evil Incarnate, she gets an additional boost.

And so now, for the first time in decades, the propaganda system is redbaiting full throttle. Too bad for them that their targets are not actually reds – not even close. But who has time for fine points like these when there is an election about to take place?

If they can associate contemporary Russia and Vladimir Putin with the Soviet Union of yesteryear, then damn the preposterousness of it – full steam ahead! And if, by defaming the good offices of RT America, they can somehow lay that taint onto Trump, then why not go for it?

It is a nauseating spectacle. But in much the way that more free speech is the remedy for free speech gone awry, more and better journalism is the best remedy there is for countering a propaganda system that, under Hillary’s aegis, could go from merely awful and politically disabling to code red dangerous.

As anyone who can watch it regularly knows, RT America puts out a quality product, about as good as it gets on American TV. It can be part of the solution.
Still not convinced? Then, if you are able, tune in – watch, listen, and see for yourself.