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## Washington's Whoppers on the War in Ukraine

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U.S. leaders have amassed a long track record of deception about Washington's international objectives and the nature of U.S. foreign clients. Modest or even minor threats and disruptions became supposed existential threats to America's security, as well as threats to regional or world order, in Washington's overwrought propaganda narratives. In addition, multiple administrations routinely whitewashed the record of authoritarian foreign clients. Thus, autocrats such as Nicaragua's Anastasio Somoza Debayle, Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, and ugly extremists, such as Syria's Sunni Jihadists, all became honorary members of the "Free World."

Both components are present in Washington's current campaign of disinformation with respect to the Ukraine war. Two deceptive arguments in U.S. propaganda are so egregious that they stand out as gigantic whoppers. The first whopper is that Russia's war against Ukraine was entirely unprovoked; nothing Ukraine, the United States, or NATO did, this story goes, threatened Russia or contributed in the slightest to the current bloody tragedy. The second whopper is that Ukraine is a liberal democratic country whose mere existence as a model in Russia's neighborhood terrifies Vladimir Putin and his inner circle of authoritarian oligarchs.

In his initial statement from the White House, President Biden stated flatly that Russia's invasion was "unprovoked and unjustified." The following day, he described the attack as a "brutal assault on the people of Ukraine without provocation, without justification, without necessity." The "unprovoked" mantra soon became a staple of the narrative put out by the administration and its allies in the news media and the foreign policy blob.

Criticisms of Russia's military action as brutal and over-the-top are entirely justified. The argument that it was utterly unprovoked, however, is misleading at best and an outright falsehood at worst. Respected analysts had warned for more than a quarter century that expanding NATO eastward to Russia's border would turn out badly, no matter who ruled in Moscow, since the move was inherently menacing and intruded on important Russian interests. Yet, multiple U.S. administrations casually spurned those recommendations for caution. Indeed, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administration policymakers continued to push for Ukraine's inclusion in NATO, despite the Kremlin's repeated and steadily escalating warnings that such a step would cross a red line and trigger a crisis.

Critics who dare contend that such Western actions constituted unwise provocations and were a major factor in the breakdown of East-West relations have been subjected to a barrage of vilification, led by the Biden administration. The favorite allegation is that they are echoing “Putin’s talking points.” The historical record, however, contains abundant evidence against such a simplistic smear.

Somewhat more sophisticated proponents of the thesis that the United States and NATO did nothing to provoke Russia, argue that there was no realistic prospect that Ukraine could join the Alliance for many years, if ever, so Putin had no reason to worry. Those arguments conveniently dodge the point that Moscow did not merely object to Ukraine getting a NATO membership card; more fundamentally, Russian leaders objected to Ukraine becoming a NATO military asset, whether formal membership was a feature or not.

It is an important distinction, because Western weaponry poured into the country, U.S. personnel trained Ukrainian military and intelligence forces, and U.S. forces conducted joint war games (military exercises) with Ukrainian military units, as did forces from other NATO countries. There is even credible evidence that U.S. and Ukrainian intelligence operatives conducted joint cyberattacks on Russian targets. To contend that such actions did not constitute a major provocation is profoundly dishonest.

So much for the first whopper. Now on to whopper two. A coordinated barrage of propaganda from the administration and its ideological allies insists that Ukraine is a bastion of freedom and democracy now under assault by a brutal authoritarian neighbor. Former CIA station chief Dan Hoffman contended that “What scares Vladimir Putin at the heart of this conflict is democracy.” He added that “Putin couldn’t stomach a democracy on his border with a Russian-speaking population and commercial links to Europe.”

At best, that argument is only half right. Russia is the aggressor in the current war, and there is no doubt that Russia is a nasty, authoritarian state. Democracy in that country has been dying a slow death for two decades at Putin’s hands.

However, the notion that Ukraine is a democracy—much less a liberal democracy—is belied by extensive facts. Even during the early years after the 2014 “Maidan Revolution,” there were numerous worrisome features to Kyiv’s conduct. The new government under President Petro Poroshenko implemented onerous censorship measures, harassed and even jailed regime critics, shelled civilians in the secessionist Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and continued the systematic corruption that had plagued Ukraine since it became independent in 1991. Those trends have persisted under current President Volodymyr Zelensky.

By the standards of corruption and political freedom alone, Ukraine was not a liberal democracy even before the war with Russia began. The annual report on corruption put out by Transparency International, published in early 2022, should have been extremely sobering to Ukraine’s defenders. Transparency evaluated 180 countries, and on a 1 to 180 scale, with 1 being the country with the least corruption. Ukraine ranked 122, just 14 points better than notoriously corrupt Russia.

In its 2022 annual report on political freedoms, Freedom House rated Ukraine just “partly free,” a status similar to that given to countries ruled by such sketchy regimes as Rodrigo Duterte’s in the Philippines. Even that was a generous rating at the time, and according to multiple accounts, developments across the board have shown serious deterioration since the war began. Zelensky has outlawed opposition political parties, closed nearly all opposition news outlets, and imprisoned numerous critics and even officials in his own administration, accusing them of being pro-Russian traitors. There are even credible reports of torture being used in political prisons and of pro-regime death squads operating with impunity throughout the country.

Zelensky and his colleagues have no tolerance for critics, domestic or foreign. The willingness to target and attempt to intimidate foreign critics became abundantly clear this summer when his government’s Center for Countering Disinformation (partly funded by U.S. taxpayers, no less) published a “blacklist” of such opponents. Numerous prominent Americans were on that list, including University of Chicago Professor (and the dean of foreign policy realists), John Mearsheimer, Fox News host Tucker Carlson, former congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, and Cato Institute Senior Fellow Doug Bandow. The ominous, threatening nature of the blacklist became even clearer in late September, when the CCD issued a revised roster (including addresses) of the top 35 targets in early October. That narrower, high-priority list denounced those critics as “disinformation terrorists” and “war criminals.” Such conduct definitely is not consistent with the behavior of a liberal democracy. Yet official Washington and its media echo chamber persist in trying to market that whopper.

Washington’s pervasive, dishonest propaganda campaign is certain to continue, aided and abetted by a shamelessly pro-war news media. The more pertinent question is whether the American people will wake up and realize that they’ve been deceived yet again about a dubious U.S. overseas intervention on behalf of an even more dubious foreign client.

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