

The Press Fumbles Again On Ukraine

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During the months preceding the Russia-Ukraine war, the U.S. news media coverage replicated virtually all the deficiencies of its treatment of previous crises, especially the Persian Gulf War, the Balkan wars, the Iraq War, and Washington's interventions in Libya and Syria. Once again there was a massive imbalance in on-camera interviews, op-eds, house editorials, and even straight news stories. A few advocates of realism and restraint did gain some exposure for their views. Likewise, a handful of media types, like Tucker Carlson and Glenn Greenwald, received attention (albeit usually hostile) in the establishment press for making the case that Washington's actions, especially pushing NATO expansion eastward and establishing a cozy military relationship with Kiev, had contributed to the onset of a crisis. Nevertheless, such views were swamped by the usual tsunami of media accounts, this time insisting that Washington must maintain solidarity with "democratic" Ukraine and persist in an uncompromising stance toward Russia.

The coverage once again provided very little context regarding the underlying issues. Matters such as NATO expansion or the difficult, contentious Russia-Ukraine relationship were either ignored or treated in a way that confirmed Western and Ukrainian virtue and maximum Russian villainy. Journalists portrayed a complex situation as a stark melodrama, with all blame put on one side. Indeed, experts and pundits who even suggested that NATO's policies had contributed to the current tensions were quickly smeared as siding with Putin, willingly circulating Russian propaganda or disinformation, or even as being outright Russian agents. Some of the architects of the new wave of smears were the same individuals who used similar tactics in the lead up to the Iraq War. Max Boot, Jennifer Rubin, and David Frum, for example, were all prominent alumni of that earlier campaign to silence dissenters, and here again they were hard at work branding critics of Washington's Russia policy as disloyal.

Once the war began, the press coverage became even more defective. The overriding message in the media has been that the United States (and all Americans) must “stand with Ukraine” in the latter’s resistance to Russian aggression. The identification of America’s best interests with Ukraine is now nearly total, and it is infused with arrogant righteousness. Noticeably missing is the sense, once so powerful in U.S. foreign policy and our general discourse, that America’s interests often are—and rightfully should be—sharply distinct from the interests and objectives of any foreign country.

In his Farewell Address, George Washington admonished his fellow citizens that a nation “which indulges towards another an habitual hatred, or an habitual fondness, is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.” He added, with a passage that applies perfectly to the attitude of both U.S. officials and journalists regarding Ukraine: “Sympathy for the favorite Nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest, in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter, without adequate inducement or justification.” What has been so striking about the media coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war is the absence of such an attitude of detachment, realism, and prudence.

The coverage also conveys little sense of the various factors and events that had led to the conflict, including NATO expansion, the moves and countermoves between the West and Russia regarding Ukraine over the years, or the significance of the secessionist war in eastern Ukraine. Instead, the overall media message is clear and starkly simplistic: Vladimir Putin is an evil man and now a brutal aggressor. There were no other reasons for the war, and anyone who suggests otherwise is a tool of Russian propaganda. Ukraine is a bastion of freedom and democracy that is now under siege, and the West, indeed the entire global community, has a moral obligation to come to the country’s defense. The invasion is an indisputable repetition of Adolf Hitler’s rampage in the 1930s, and if the democratic powers do not halt Putin’s aggression in its tracks, he will not stop with territorial gains in Ukraine but seek to conquer other European nations, eventually plunging humanity into another world war. Indeed, his assault on Ukraine poses a potentially lethal threat to democracy throughout the international system.

Such shallowness has been most evident in the television coverage. American viewers are inundated with images of exploding shells from the invading Russian forces, sights of desperate, tearful refugees (mostly women and children) fleeing the invaders, and determined Ukrainian civilians arming themselves to defend their country. Because television is a visual medium that always tries to evoke emotions, much of that was to be expected. However, treatment of the Ukraine war has truly gone over the top. Providing a deluge of images showing traumatized civilian refugees adds little to anyone’s understanding of the conflict.

It hasn't helped the media's credibility that some of the material they telecast turned out to be fake. A widely circulated video clip of a Ukrainian girl verbally confronting Russian troops was actually a Palestinian girl confronting Israeli troops. Miss Ukraine 2015 was not, as claimed, taking up arms against the Russian invaders, unless she planned to use an Airsoft gun. The supposed martyrs of Snake Island, who allegedly were blown to smithereens after defying and cursing a Russian warship, turned out to be very much alive. Some images of aerial combat between Ukrainian pilots and Russian aggressors were from video games. Too often, the Western press served as a conduit for crude Ukrainian propaganda.

Worse than the emotionalism has been the media's receptivity to (and often enthusiasm for) some of the most reckless policy options. When Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois and others contended that NATO should impose a no-fly zone over Ukraine, there was little pushback from either news personnel or guest experts on TV. The media were even out in front of the Biden administration, which ruled out a no-fly zone as too dangerous.

Some pertinent questions and objections from professional journalists should have been obvious. How would a no-fly zone be enforced? Would NATO forces really be willing to shoot down Russian planes violating the edict? If not, wouldn't NATO look as though it made a meaningless, impotent threat? If the U.S. and its allies did shoot down Russian planes, were Kinzinger and other no-fly zone advocates making the highly doubtful assumption that Moscow would not retaliate? If the Russians did retaliate, how would the United States avoid being in a full-scale war against a nuclear-armed adversary?

The scrutiny of other potentially dangerous schemes, such as Washington and NATO sending Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to Ukrainian forces, was no better. There was considerable enthusiasm in the mainstream media for Warsaw's proposal to send jet fighters to Ukraine so that Kiev could battle Russia's air force on more equal terms. Only a few reporters raised questions about whether such extensive support might ultimately make the United States a de facto belligerent, with all the risks entailed in that status.

Sometimes, the total identification of prominent news personnel with Ukraine's cause boiled to the surface. A notable case involved NBC's chief foreign correspondent Richard Engel, who asked whether the West could just "watch in silence" while a huge Russian military column continued to roll toward Kiev. Both his tone and words, including the observation that "the U.S./NATO could likely destroy it," implied a belief that the United States and NATO could not—certainly should not—remain on the sidelines as the column neared Kiev. Unfortunately, such reflexive hawkishness was typical.

Barely four days into the war, Glenn Greenwald observed, "It is genuinely hard to overstate how overwhelming the unity and consensus in U.S. political and media circles is. It is as close to a unanimous and dissent-free discourse as anything in

memory, certainly since the days following 9/11.” If he was exaggerating at all, it wasn’t by much. The tiny number of experts who offered deeper and more nuanced views of the war, such as retired military officers Daniel Davis and Douglas McGregor, stood out because of their rarity. So too did the few outlets that featured them, principally Tucker Carlson’s show on Fox News. It was an all-too-familiar pattern of homogenized, pro-activist messaging that continued the news media’s track record on international affairs over the decades.

Emotionalism and total identification with Ukraine and its cause have been the overwhelming features of how the press has handled the Russia-Ukraine war. According to the conventional wisdom in the media, it is not enough to denounce the Russian invasion for what it is—an ugly, brazen act of aggression. U.S. press coverage has gone well beyond that standard in its treatment of the war, and the overlap between the dominant media narrative and Washington’s official policy is massive.

That approach has produced two especially pernicious effects. One is that the crusading mentality has delegitimized even the most reasoned dissent about U.S. policy toward Russia. Karl Rove typified that approach in a prominent *Wall Street Journal* op-ed arguing that true Republicans should automatically “stand up for Ukraine.” Articles dismissing critics as “Putin apologists” or “Putin’s groupies” have become ubiquitous. The other effect has been to foment outright anti-Russia hysteria in the public. The atmosphere of intolerance has begun to resemble the anti-German sentiment in the United States during World War I.

Stifling dissent, being a catalyst for ethnic hatred, and cheerleading for a dangerous military crusade is not what the American people need from a responsible news media. Unfortunately, that is what they are getting yet again.

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