

# The Mind of the Mass Media: Email Exchange Between Myself and a Leading Washington Post Foreign Policy Reporter

By [William Blum](#)

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

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*Dear Mr. Birnbaum,*

*You write Trump “made no mention of Russia’s adventures in Ukraine”. Well, neither he nor Putin nor you made any mention of America’s adventures in the Ukraine, which resulted in the overthrow of the Ukrainian government in 2014, which led to the justified Russian adventure. Therefore ...?*

*If Russia overthrew the Mexican government would you blame the US for taking some action in Mexico?*

*William Blum*

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Dear Mr. Blum,

Thanks for your note. “America’s adventures in the Ukraine”: what are you talking about? Last time I checked, it was Ukrainians in the streets of Kiev who caused Yanukovych to turn tail and run. Whether or not that was a good thing, we can leave aside, but it wasn’t the Americans who did it.

It is, however, Russian special forces who fanned out across Crimea in February and March 2014, according to Putin, and Russians who came down from Moscow who stoked conflict in eastern Ukraine in the months after, according to their own accounts.

Best, Michael Birnbaum

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*To MB,*

*I can scarcely believe your reply. Do you read nothing but the Post? Do you not know of high State Dept official Victoria Nuland and the US Ambassador in Ukraine in Maidan Square to encourage the protesters? She spoke of 5 billion (sic) dollars given to aid the protesters who were soon to overthrow the govt. She and the US Amb. spoke openly of who to choose as*

the next president. And he's the one who became president. This is all on tape. I guess you never watch Russia Today (RT). God forbid! I read the Post every day. You should watch RT once in a while.

William Blum

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Click to listen to Nuland's "F\*ck the EU Leaked Phone Call"

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To WB,

I was the Moscow bureau chief of the newspaper; I reported extensively in Ukraine in the months and years following the protests. My observations are not based on reading. RT is not a credible news outlet, but I certainly do read far beyond our own pages, and of course I talk to the actual actors on the ground myself – that's my job.

And: yes, of course Nuland was in the Maidan – but encouraging the protests, as she clearly did, is not the same as sparking them or directing them, nor is playing favorites with potential successors, as she clearly did, the same as being directly responsible for overthrowing the government. I'm not saying the United States wasn't involved in trying to shape events. So were Russia and the European Union. But Ukrainians were in the driver's seat the whole way through. I know the guy who posted the first Facebook call to protest Yanukovych in November 2013; he's not an American agent. RT, meanwhile, reports fabrications and terrible falsehoods all the time. By all means consume a healthy and varied media diet – don't stop at the US mainstream media. But ask yourself how often RT reports critically on the Russian government, and consider how that lacuna shapes the rest of their reporting. You will find plenty of reporting in the *Washington Post* that is critical of the US government and US foreign policy in general, and decisions in Ukraine and the Ukrainian government in specific. Our aim is to be fair, without picking sides.

Best, Michael Birnbaum

\*\*\*end of exchange\*\*\*

Right, the United States doesn't play indispensable roles in changes of foreign governments; never has, never will; even when they offer billions of dollars; even when they pick the new president, which, apparently, is not the same as picking sides. It should be noticed that Mr Birnbaum offers not a single example to back up his extremist claim that RT "reports fabrications and terrible falsehoods all the time." "All the time", no less! That should make it easy to give some examples.

For the record, I think RT is much less biased than the *Post* on international affairs. And, yes, it's bias, not "fake news" that's the main problem – Cold-War/anti-Communist/anti-Russian bias that Americans have been raised with for a full century. RT defends Russia against the countless mindless attacks from the West. Who else is there to do that? Should not the Western media be held accountable for what they broadcast? Americans are so unaccustomed to hearing the Russian side defended, or hearing it at all, that when they do it can seem rather weird.

To the casual observer, THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA indictments of July 14 of Russian intelligence agents (GRU) reinforced the argument that the Soviet government interfered in the US 2016 presidential election. Regard these indictments in proper perspective and we find that election interference is only listed as a supposed objective, with charges actually being for unlawful cyber operations, identity theft, and conspiracy to launder money by American individuals unconnected to the Russian government. So ... we're still waiting for some evidence of actual Russian interference in the election aimed at determining the winner.

The Russians did it (cont.)

Each day I spend about three hours reading the *Washington Post*. Amongst other things I'm looking for evidence – real, legal, courtroom-quality evidence, or at least something logical and rational – to pin down those awful Russkis for their many recent crimes, from influencing the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election to use of a nerve agent in the UK. But I do not find such evidence.

Each day brings headlines like these:

- “U.S. to add economic sanctions on Russia: Attack with nerve agent on former spy in England forces White House to act”
- “Is Russia exploiting new Facebook goal?”
- “Experts: Trump team lacks urgency on Russian threat”

These are all from the same day, August 9, which led me to thinking of doing this article, but similar stories can be found any day in the *Post* and in major newspapers anywhere in America. None of the articles begins to explain how Russia did these things, or even WHY. Motivation appears to have become a lost pursuit in the American mass media. The one thing sometimes mentioned, which I think may have some credibility, is Russia's preference of Trump over Hillary Clinton in 2016. But this doesn't begin to explain how Russia could pull off any of the electoral magic it's accused of, which would be feasible only if the United States were a backward, Third World, Banana Republic.

There's the Facebook ads, as well as all the other ads ... The people who are influenced by this story – have they read many of the actual ads? Many are pro-Clinton or anti-Trump; many are both; many are neither. It's one big mess, the only rational explanation of this which I've read is that they come from money-making websites, “click-bait” sites as they're known, which earn money simply by attracting visitors.

As to the nerve agents, it makes more sense if the UK or the CIA did it to make the Russians look bad, because the anti-Russian scandal which followed was totally predictable. Why would Russia choose the time of the World Cup in Moscow – of which all of Russia was immensely proud – to bring such notoriety down upon their head? But that would have been an ideal time for their enemies to want to embarrass them.

However, I have no doubt that the great majority of Americans who follow the news each day believe the official stories about the Russians. They're particularly impressed with the fact that every US intelligence agency supports the official stories. They would not be impressed at all if told that a dozen Russian intelligence agencies all disputed the charges. Group-think is alive and well all over the world. As is Cold War II.

But we're the Good Guys, ain't we?

For a defender of US foreign policy there's very little that causes extreme heartburn more than someone implying a "moral equivalence" between American behavior and that of Russia. That was the case during Cold War I and it's the same now in Cold War II. It just drives them up the wall.

After the United States passed a law last year requiring TV station RT (*Russia Today*) to register as a "foreign agent", the Russians passed their own law allowing authorities to require foreign media to register as a "foreign agent". Senator John McCain denounced the new Russian law, saying there is "no equivalence" between RT and networks such as *Voice of America*, CNN and the BBC, whose journalists "seek the truth, debunk lies, and hold governments accountable." By contrast, he said, "RT's propagandists debunk the truth, spread lies, and seek to undermine democratic governments in order to further Vladimir Putin's agenda."

And here is Tom Malinowski, former Assistant Secretary of State for democracy, human rights and labor (2014-2017) – last year he reported that Putin had "charged that the U.S. government had interfered 'aggressively' in Russia's 2012 presidential vote," claiming that Washington had "gathered opposition forces and financed them." Putin, wrote Malinowski, "apparently got President Trump to agree to a mutual commitment that neither country would interfere in the other's elections."

"Is this moral equivalence fair?" Malinowski asked and answered: "In short, no. Russia's interference in the United States' 2016 election could not have been more different from what the United States does to promote democracy in other countries."

How do you satirize such officials and such high-school beliefs?

We also have the case of the US government agency, National Endowment for Democracy (NED), which has interfered in more elections than the CIA or God. Indeed, the man who helped draft the legislation establishing NED, Allen Weinstein, declared in 1991:

"A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA."

On April 12, 2018 the presidents of two of NED's wings wrote:

"A specious narrative has come back into circulation: that Moscow's campaign of political warfare is no different from U.S.-supported democracy assistance."

"Democracy assistance", you see, is what they call NED's election-interferences and government-overthrows. The authors continue:

"This narrative is churned out by propaganda outlets such as RT and Sputnik [radio station]. ... it is deployed by isolationists who propound a U.S. retreat from global leadership."

“Isolationists” is what conservatives call critics of US foreign policy whose arguments they can’t easily dismiss, so they imply that such people just don’t want the US to be involved in anything abroad.

And “global leadership” is what they call being first in election-interferences and government-overthrows.

What God giveth, Trump taketh away?

The White House sends out a newsletter, “1600 daily”, each day to subscribers about what’s new in the marvelous world inhabited by Donald J. Trump. On July 25 it reported about the president’s talk before the Veterans of Foreign Wars national convention in Missouri:

“We don’t apologize for America anymore. We stand up for America. And we stand up for our National Anthem,” the President said to “a thundering ovation”.

At the same time, the newsletter informed us that the State Department is bringing together religious leaders and others for the first-ever Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom.

“The goal is simple,” we are told, “to promote the God-given human right to believe what you choose.”

Aha! I see. But what about those who believe that standing for the National Anthem implies support for America’s racism or police brutality? Is it not a God-given human right to believe such a thing and “take a knee” in protest?

Or is it the devil that puts such evil ideas into our heads?

The weather all over is not just extreme ... It’s downright freakish.

The argument I like to use when speaking to those who don’t accept the idea that extreme weather phenomena are largely man-made is this:

Well, we can proceed in one of two ways:

1. We can do our best to limit the greenhouse effect by curtailing greenhouse gas emissions (carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide) into the atmosphere, and if it turns out that these emissions were not in fact a significant cause of the widespread extreme weather phenomena, then we’ve wasted a lot of time, effort and money (although other benefits to the ecosystem would still accrue).
2. We can do nothing at all to curtail the emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, and if it turns out that these emissions were in fact the leading cause of all the extreme weather phenomena, then we’ve lost the earth and life as we know it.

So, are you a gambler?

Irony of ironies ... Misfortune of misfortunes ... We have a leader who has zero interest in such things; indeed, the man is unequivocally contemptuous of the very idea of the need to

modify individual or social behavior for the sake of the environment. And one after another he's appointed his soulmates to head government agencies concerned with the environment.

What is it that motivates such people? I think it's mainly that they realize that blame for much of environmental damage can be traced, directly or indirectly, to corporate profit-seeking behavior, an ideology to which they are firmly committed.

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*This article was originally published on the author's blog site: [The Anti-Empire Report](#).*

## Notes

1. *Washington Post*, November 16, 2017
2. *Ibid.*, July 23, 2017
3. *Ibid.*, September 22, 1991
4. William Blum, *Rogue State: A Guide to the World's Only Superpower*, chapter 19 on NED
5. *Washington Post*, April 2, 2018

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