Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War or: How American imperialism learned to stop worrying and love the bomb

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28 April 2024

Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War, the new series on Netflix by Brian Knappenberger, is a documentary about the Cold War and the current US conflict with Russia.

??"With firsthand accounts and access to prominent figures around the world, this comprehensive docuseries explores the Cold War and its aftermath," reads Netflix's breathless promotional blurb.

The documentary's trailer features chilling excerpts from interviews with such figures as whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, who released the Pentagon Papers, Garrett M. Graff, author of *Raven Rock: The Story of the U.S. Government's Secret Plan to Save Itself–While the Rest of Us Die* (2017), a book about the United States' secret nuclear war plans, and historian Timothy Naftali, who revealed American government collaboration with leading German Nazis after World War II.

As the series progresses, however, historians and critics of US foreign policy are replaced by some—for lack of a better phrase—of the world's leading war criminals, including former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, one of the architects of the Iraq War, and Robert Gates, who, as Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director, presided over the Iran-Contra scandal and later served as Secretary of Defense.

It gradually emerges that this "monumental" documentary is, in fact, an equally monumental exercise in the dissemination of US militarist propaganda. Its disclosures about Washington's foreign policy crimes serve primarily to give credence to its central purpose of agitating for world war against Russia.

In the course of the documentary, Michael McFaul, former US ambassador to Russia and a leading proponent of the Ukraine bloodbath, offers a comment that sums up in microcosm the documentary's overall approach.

> I would say very openly: Has the CIA been involved in coups? The answer to that is, yes, of course. The 1953 Iranian coup against Mossadegh. There are lots of examples of that. To the best of my knowledge, the CIA was not doing that in Ukraine in 2004, or Russia in 2011. Or in Ukraine in 2013 and 2014.

This comment, presented without comment or criticism, combines an undeniable truth with an absurd lie. It is, of course, well-known that the CIA was the leading force behind the overthrow of the Iranian government of Mohammad Mosaddegh in 1953.

It is equally true, however, that, in the words of a recent *New York Times* article, "a decade ago … The C.I.A. and other American intelligence agencies" initiated a "partnership" that "transformed Ukraine … into one of Washington's most important intelligence partners against the Kremlin today." In English, this is called a coup.

McFaul's amalgam of embarrassing truth with bald-faced lies is the modus operandi of the series. It freely discusses the crimes of American imperialism, provided they took place years ago, while excluding anything but benevolent and altruistic motives and exemplary conduct in current US foreign policy.

This approach, which involves both selective admissions and falsifications, means that the series resides in a sort of parallel universe to Knappenberger's previous documentary, *Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror*.

The villains who funded and armed Osama bin Laden and launched the disastrous and murderous invasion of Iraq based on the doctrine of "preemptive war" in the previous series become the heroes of the "struggle for democracy" in the new one, without any attempt to explain the change in casting.

Substantive revelations

With that said, the admissions the series does make are significant and valuable.

The first episode includes a horrific depiction of the effects of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and a frank reference to the fact that the decision to use them was aimed at sending a message to the Soviet Union that any further military advances into Eastern Europe and China would be met with overwhelming American military force. "Some would say [it was a] war crime," declares one historian in the first episode.

The episode includes a detailed and harrowing account of the displacement of Japanese Americans during World War II in a climate of state-promoted anti-Japanese racism.

The second episode—drawing heavily on an interview with Ellsberg—reveals that during the Cold War human civilization came far closer to total destruction during the Cuban Missile Crisis than had been publicly known. Ellsberg explains that not only did the US president have the authority to wipe out humankind, but a large number of other military officials did as well. *Dr. Strangelove* was a "documentary," not a work of fiction, Ellsberg observes.

In the third episode, the viewer is presented with a litany of CIA crimes during the Cold War, including coups all over the world, the promotion of disinformation and the control of the press. One historian notes:

> The early CIA, from the late 1940s into the 1960s, had hundreds of influence operations where they purchased the favor of a newspaper editor in places like Cairo, Tokyo, or Berlin. There were a handful, some say more than a handful, of American journalists who were paid by the CIA or cooperated with the CIA free of charge.

From documentary to propaganda

However, as noted above, after these initial episodes, the series ceases to resemble a documentary in any meaningful fashion and becomes an extended piece of propaganda.

New faces and voices appear, including those of Anne Applebaum and a shockingly broad array of prime ministers and leading officials from the US and its NATO allies. The stench of CIA/State Department propaganda, which co-producer Alexandra Poolos peddled covering the Balkans for Radio Free Europe, becomes overwhelming.

The final episodes are turned almost directly over to Rice, National Security Advisor and later Secretary of State under George W. Bush, and Gates, Defense Secretary under both the younger Bush and Barack Obama.

The documentary's premise

The second half of *Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War* revolves around the assertion that the present war in Ukraine is a seamless continuation of the conflict between the US and the Soviet Union.

In an interview, Knappenberger explains,

> The basic premise is the Cold War is not over, and never was over. We still live with some of those same tensions of the Cold War. We just keep telling those events up to the invasion of Ukraine, which has all of the same tactics and all the same tensions as the rest of the Cold War. That's the main thing we do that hasn't been done. The collapse of the Soviet Union is just one part of this story.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines the Cold War as "the state of political hostility that existed between the Soviet bloc countries and the US-led Western powers from 1945 to 1990."

Knappenberger's documentary, in the form of interviews with leading state figures, attempts to redefine that definition, arguing that the Cold War never ended. While nationalized property may have been privatized with the end of the USSR, both the Soviet Union and the present-day Russian Federation are essentially one, in that both are "empires."

The US meanwhile, standing for the ideals of freedom and self-determination, has opposed "imperialism"—both in its Soviet and Russian varieties.

This thesis is crude, stupid and reactionary, but the producers have managed to craft a 12-hour series, involving over a hundred interviewees, some highly distinguished and knowledgeable, around it.

In fact, the basic thesis of the documentary is refuted by Ellsberg in the third episode. He declares:

> The Russian army had been enormously overestimated. The Russians were not on a crash program to build missiles, which the people around me all took for granted that they were and were not superior. We're not trying to be superior, which meant that they were not trying for a first strike capability against the US, which in turn really meant they weren't trying to dominate the world militarily, that discovery should have led to a rethinking of our whole paradigm, their whole world perspective as to who we were confronting and what their aims were, and how we don't put them, but it didn't at all.

The narrative of the permanent "evil empire" is not a mere fiction, but a direct inversion of reality. American capitalism, and not the Soviet Union or the post-Soviet Russian state, is an "empire" bent on subjugating the world.

Revelations by omission

If there is one image associated with the dangers and horror of nuclear war firmly etched in the consciousness of certain generations of Americans, it is the 60-second 1964 campaign ad by Lyndon B. Johnson, known as the "Daisy" ad. It depicts a little girl counting as she plucks the petals from a daisy, followed by a nuclear countdown and footage of an atomic explosion.

Yet, seemingly inexplicably, *Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War*, in its 12 hours, could not find space to include this 60-second clip. Why?

The omission is not an oversight. Including the famous campaign ad would require an explanation of the bitter factional divisions within the American state over nuclear war with the Soviet Union: an examination that the documentary strenuously refuses to undertake.

The "Daisy" ad targeted Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, author of *Why Not Victory*?, which argued that the US was insufficiently aggressive in confronting the Soviet Union because the American population was too fearful of nuclear war.

In fact, Goldwater's name is not mentioned in the mini-series.

"A craven fear of death is entering the American consciousness," the Arizona Republican wrote, "We want to stay alive, of course; but more than that we want to be free."

Democratic Party candidate Johnson countered Goldwater's slogan, "In your heart, you know he's right," with the rhyme, "In your heart, you know he might"—implying that Goldwater might bring about the end of the world by using nuclear weapons.

Commenting on Goldwater's campaign in his well-known essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," American political theorist Richard Hofstadter noted that what had "become clear by 1964, and what could not be undone in the campaign, was the public impression that Goldwater's imagination had never confronted the implications of thermonuclear war." The Republican candidate, Hofstadter wrote, "seemed strangely casual about the prospect of total destruction."

At the time, Johnson, and with him dominant sections of the US political establishment, rejected Goldwater as a quasi-lunatic, willing to destroy the planet in a monomaniacal quest to vanquish the Soviet Union.

Beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s, however, and rooted in the growing decline of American capitalism, the policy of "containment" relative to the Soviet Union was replaced with that of "rollback." Washington initiated a massive nuclear arms buildup, coupled with the funneling of arms to proxy forces such as the Mujahideen, led by Osama

Bin Laden in Afghanistan, and the Contras in Nicaragua.

In the face of overwhelming military and political pressure from American imperialism, the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy made the decision to liquidate the USSR and funneled the wealth of state-owned industry into its own pockets, as well as the pockets of its imperialist paymasters.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has led to the eruption of an orgy of imperialist violence, from the Gulf War to the bombing of the former Yugoslavia, to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan within the framework of the "war on terror."

In this period, the political forces arguing for the most aggressive actions with regard to the Soviet Union during the Cold War came to dominate US foreign policy. The doctrine of American imperialism was summed up in a 1991 editorial statement in the *Wall Street Journal*: "force works."

Which leads us to the featured interviewees in the last two episodes of *Turning Point: The Bomb and the Cold War*: Rice and Gates.

These two imperialist bandits, who between them oversaw the plotting of aggressive war and countless terrorist attacks, and who devised or approved shockingly sadistic forms of torture, make use of the extended platform to offer pearl-clutching monologues about their horror and dismay at the audacity of Vladimir Putin to oppose the American military.

However, in fact, the pair fit seamlessly into the documentary, alongside the dozens of other interviewees, mostly Democrats, in an almost uniform monoculture of military and diplomatic strategy.

The overall tenor of opinion in the second half of the series finds appropriate expression in a social media post from Kaja Kallas, Estonian prime minister, announcing the series:

> The new @netflix series about the Cold War is out. I explain based on Estonia's and my family's history why we can't let Russian aggression pay off in Ukraine. If we fail, we'll wake up in a more dangerous world. Weakness provokes aggressors, not strength.

This view is summed up with somewhat greater sophistication in the concluding episode by Mary Sarotte, of the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs, who declares:

> How do we stand up to what Putin is doing and defend our values despite the risk of nuclear catastrophe? That is an immense challenge. Fortunately, we have the history of the Cold War, to help us to guide us because we're going to need what we learned during the cold war again. So we need to find a way even in full consciousness of the risk of nuclear escalation to stand up for values, to stand up for what is right in the face of evil.

The basic conception is that the United States, by abandoning all restraints on nuclear rearmament, by arming terrorists like Bin Laden and the Contras, and by being willing to tolerate nuclear annihilation, "won" the Cold War.

According to this reckless doctrine, the winner in the game of nuclear war is the one willing to risk the most. The conclusion of the 1983 film *WarGames*, "the only way to win is not to play at all," becomes, "the only way to win is to be willing to die."

American imperialism's "victory" in the Cold War is to be repeated on an even greater scale through forcing the breakup of Russia, a country in possession of the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal.

Goldwater's disciples, once the "lunatic fringe" of American politics, practitioners of the "paranoid style," now encompass nearly the totality of official American military and strategic thought, from the "neo-conservative" Rice, to the former Goldwater Republican turned Democratic warmonger-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

The constant invocations of the power of military violence to solve all problems, the declaration that caution is tantamount to treason, are expressions of deep and irremediable crisis.

"His rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last, / For violent fires soon burn out themselves," Shakespeare's John of Gaunt observes of Richard II.

American capitalism is bankrupt. Awash in debt, running the economy with the throttle wide open to build weapons, wage wars and operate its Ponzi schemes, US imperialism is headed for a catastrophe from which no acts of violence will save it, and which will see its revolutionary overthrow and replacement with socialism.