[America's Coup Machine: Destroying Democracy Since 1953](http://www.alternet.org/world/americas-coup-machine-destroying-democracy-1953?page=0%2C5&paging=off&current_page=1" \l "bookmark)

*U.S. efforts to overthrow foreign governments leave the world less peaceful, less just and less hopeful.*

*April 8, 2014* Soon after the 2004 U.S. coup to depose President Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti, I heard Aristide's lawyer Ira Kurzban speaking in Miami.  He began his talk with a riddle: "Why has there never been a coup in Washington D.C.?"  The answer: "Because there is no U.S. Embassy in Washington D.C."  This introduction was greeted with wild applause by a mostly Haitian-American audience who understood it only too well.

Ukraine's former security chief, Aleksandr Yakimenko, has reported that the coup-plotters who overthrew the elected government in Ukraine, "[basically lived in the (U.S.) Embassy](http://rt.com/op-edge/mercenaries-at-maidan-ukraine-558/).  They were there every day."  We also know from [a leaked Russian intercept](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957) that they were in close contact with Ambassador Pyatt and the senior U.S. official in charge of the coup, former Dick Cheney aide Victoria Nuland, officially the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs.  And we can assume that many of their days in the Embassy were spent in strategy and training sessions with their individual CIA case officers.

To place the coup in Ukraine in historical context, this is at least the 80th time the United States has organized [a coup or a failed coup](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_coups_d'%C3%A9tat_and_coup_attempts) in a foreign country since 1953.  That was when President Eisenhower discovered in Iran that the CIA could overthrow elected governments who refused to sacrifice the future of their people to Western commercial and geopolitical interests. Most U.S. coups have led to severe repression, disappearances, extrajudicial executions, torture, corruption, extreme poverty and inequality, and prolonged setbacks for the democratic aspirations of people in the countries affected. The plutocratic and ultra-conservative nature of the forces the U.S. has brought to power in Ukraine make it unlikely to be an exception.

Noam Chomsky calls William Blum's classic, [*Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions since World War II,*](http://www.amazon.com/Killing-Hope-Military-Interventions-Since/dp/1567510523/ref=pd_sim_sbs_b_3?ie=UTF8&refRID=064GA0M04G74H2S1MMKE) "Far and away the best book on the topic."  If you're looking for historical context for what you are reading or watching on TV about the coup in Ukraine, Killing Hope will provide it.  The title has never been more apt as we watch the hopes of people from all regions of Ukraine being sacrificed on the same altar as those of people in Iran (1953); Guatemala(1954); Thailand (1957); Laos (1958-60); the Congo (1960); Turkey (1960, 1971 & 1980); Ecuador (1961 & 1963); South Vietnam (1963); Brazil (1964); the Dominican Republic (1963); Argentina (1963); Honduras (1963 & 2009); Iraq (1963 & 2003); Bolivia (1964, 1971 & 1980); Indonesia (1965); Ghana (1966); Greece (1967); Panama (1968 & 1989); Cambodia (1970); Chile (1973); Bangladesh (1975); Pakistan (1977); Grenada (1983); Mauritania (1984); Guinea (1984); Burkina Faso (1987); Paraguay (1989); Haiti (1991 & 2004); Russia (1993); Uganda (1996);and Libya (2011).  This list does not include a roughly equal number of failed coups, nor coups in Africa and elsewhere in which a U.S. role is suspected but unproven.

The disquieting reality of the world we live in is that American efforts to destroy democracy, even as it pretends to champion it, have left the world less peaceful, less just and less hopeful.  When Harold Pinter won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, at the height of the genocidal American war on Iraq, he devoted much of his [acceptance speech](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html) to an analysis of this dichotomy.  He said of the U.S., "It has exercised a quite clinical manipulation of power worldwide while masquerading as a force for universal good.  It's a brilliant, even witty, highly successful act of hypnosis… Brutal, indifferent, scornful and ruthless it may be, but it is also very clever."

The basic framework of U.S. coups has hardly evolved since 1953.  The main variables between coups in different places and times have been the scale and openness of the U.S. role and the level of violence used.  There is a strong correlation between the extent of U.S. involvement and the level of violence.  At one extreme, the U.S. war on Iraq was a form of regime change that involved hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops and killed hundreds of thousands of people.  On the other hand, the U.S. role in General Suharto's coup in Indonesia in 1965 remained covert even as he killed almost as many people.  Only long after the fact did [U.S. officials take credit for their role](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Blum/Indonesia65_KH.html) in Suharto's campaign of mass murder, and it will be some time before they brag publicly about their roles in Ukraine.

But as Harold Pinter explained, the U.S. has always preferred "low-intensity conflict" to full-scale invasions and occupations.  The CIA and U.S. special forces use proxies and covert operations to overthrow governments and suppress movements that challenge America's insatiable quest for global power.  A coup is the climax of such operations, and it is usually only when these "low-intensity" methods fail that a country becomes a target for direct U.S. military aggression.  Iraq only became a target for U.S. invasion and occupation after a [failed CIA coup in June 1996.](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/sep/28/iraq.military)  The U.S. attacked Panama in 1989 only after [five CIA coup attempts](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/gilboa.htm) failed to remove General Noriega from power. After long careers as CIA agents, both Hussein and Noriega had exceptional knowledge of U.S. operations and methods that enabled them to resist regime change by anything less than overwhelming U.S. military force.

But most U.S. coups follow a model that has hardly changed between 1953 and the latest coup in Ukraine in 2014.  This model has three stages:

**1) Creating and strengthening opposition forces**

In the early stages of a U.S. plan for regime change, there is little difference between the methods used to achieve it at the ballot box or by an anti-constitutional coup.  Many of these tools and methods were developed to install right-wing governments in occupied countries in Europe and Asia after World War II. They include forming and funding conservative political parties, student groups, trade unions and media outlets, and running well-oiled propaganda campaigns both in the country being targeted and in regional, international and U.S. media.

[Post-WWII Italy is a case in point](http://polisci2.ucsd.edu/kash/142Q/Miller%201983.pdf). At the end of the war, the U.S. used the American Federation of Labor's agents in France and Italy to funnel money through non-communist trade unions to conservative candidates and political parties.  But socialists and communists won a plurality of votes in the 1946 election in Italy, and then joined forces to form the Popular Democratic Front for the next election in 1948.  The U.S. worked with the Catholic Church, conducted a massive propaganda campaign using Italian-American celebrities like Frank Sinatra, and printed 10 million letters for Italian-Americans to mail to their relatives in Italy.  The U.S. threatened a total cut-off of aid to the war-ravaged country, where allied bombing had killed 50,000 civilians and left much of the country in ruins.

The FDP was reduced from a combined 40% of the votes in 1946 to 31% in 1948, leaving Italy in the hands of increasingly corrupt U.S.-backed coalitions led by the Christian Democrats for the next 46 years.  Italy was saved from an imaginary communist dictatorship, but more importantly from an independent democratic socialist program committed to workers' rights and to protecting small and medium-sized Italian businesses against competition from U.S. multinationals.

[The U.S. employed similar tactics in Chile](http://www.fas.org/irp/ops/policy/church-chile.htm) in the 1960s to prevent the election of Salvador Allende.  He came within 3% of winning the presidency in 1958, so the Kennedy administration sent a team of 100 State Department and CIA officers to Chile in what one of them later called a "blatant and almost obscene" effort to subvert the next election in 1964.  The CIA provided more than half the Christian Democrats' campaign funds and launched a multimedia propaganda campaign on film, TV, radio, newspapers, posters and flyers.  This classic "red scare" campaign, dominated by images of firing squads and Soviet tanks, was designed mainly to terrify women.  The CIA produced 20 radio spots per day that were broadcast on at least 45 stations, as well as dozens of fabricated daily "news" broadcasts.  Thousands of posters depicted children with hammers and sickles stamped on their foreheads.  The Christian Democrat Eduardo Frei defeated Allende by 17%, with a huge majority among women.

But despite the U.S. propaganda campaign, Allende was finally elected in 1970. When he consolidated his position in Congressional elections in 1973 despite a virtual U.S. economic embargo and an ever-escalating destabilization campaign, his fate was sealed, at the hands of the CIA and the U.S.-backed military, led by General Pinochet.

In Ukraine, the U.S. has worked since independence in 1991 to promote pro-Western parties and candidates, climaxing in the "Orange Revolution" in 2004.  But the Western-backed governments of Viktor Yushchenko and Yulia Tymoshenko became just as corrupt and unpopular as previous ones, and former Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich was elected President in 2010.

The U.S. employed all its traditional tactics leading up to the coup in 2014.  The U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED) has partially taken over the CIA's role in grooming opposition candidates, parties and political movements, with an annual budget of $100 million to spend in countries around the world.  The NED made no secret of targeting Ukraine as a top priority, [funding 65 projects there](http://www.ned.org/fa/where-we-work/eurasia/ukraine), more than in any other country.  The NED's neoconservative president, Carl Gershman, called Ukraine "the biggest prize" in a [Washington Post op-ed](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/former-soviet-states-stand-up-to-russia-will-the-us/2013/09/26/b5ad2be4-246a-11e3-b75d-5b7f66349852_story.html) in September 2013, as the U.S. operation there prepared to move into its next phase.

**2) Violent street demonstrations**

In November 2013, the European Union presented President Yanukovich with [a 1,500 page "free trade agreement](http://rbth.com/international/2013/12/02/ukraine_does_a_u-turn_on_europe_32179.html)," similar to NAFTA or the TPP, but which withheld actual EU membership from Ukraine. The agreement would have opened Ukraine's borders to Western exports and investment without a reciprocal opening of the EU's borders. Ukraine, a major producer of cheese and poultry, would have been allowed to export only 5% of its cheese and 1% of its poultry to the EU. Meanwhile Western firms could have used Ukraine as a gateway to flood Russia with cheap products from Asia. This would have forced Russia to close its borders to Ukraine, shattering the industrial economy of Eastern Ukraine.

Understandably, and for perfectly sound reasons as a Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich rejected the EU agreement. This was the signal for pro-Western and right-wing groups in Kiev to take to the street.  In the West, we tend to interpret street demonstrations as representing surges of populism and democracy.  But we should distinguish left-wing demonstrations against right-wing governments from the kind of violent right-wing demonstrations that have always been part of U.S. regime change strategy.

[In Tehran in 1953](http://robinlea.com/pub/WilliamBlum/killing-hope/chapter-9.html), the CIA spent a million dollars to hire gangsters and "extremely competent professional organizers", as the CIA's Kermit Roosevelt called them, to stage increasingly violent demonstrations, until loyal and rebel army units were fighting in the streets of Tehran and at least 300 people were killed.  The CIA spent millions more to bribe members of parliament and other influential Iranians. Mossadegh was forced to resign, and the Shah restored Western ownership of the oil industry. BP divided the spoils with American firms, until the Shah was overthrown 26 years later by the Iranian Revolution and the oil industry was re-nationalized. This pattern of short-term success followed by eventual independence from U.S. interests is a common result of CIA coups, most notably in Latin America, where they have led many of our closest neighbors to become increasingly committed to political and economic independence from the United States.

[In Haiti in 2004](http://www.democracynow.org/2004/4/7/witnesses_u_s_special_forces_trained), 200 U.S. special forces trained 600 FRAPH militiamen and other anti-Lavalas forces at a training camp across the border in the Dominican Republic.  These forces then invaded northern Haiti and gradually spread violence and chaos across the country to set the stage for the overthrow of President Aristide.

In Ukraine, street protests turned violent in January 2014 as the neo-Nazi [Svoboda Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Svoboda_(political_party)) and the [Right Sector militia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right_Sector) took charge of the crowds in the streets.  The Right Sector militia only appeared in Ukraine in the past 6 months, although it incorporated existing extreme-right groups and gangs.  It is partly funded by Ukrainian exiles in the U.S. and Europe, and may be a creation of the CIA.  After Right Sector seized government buildings, parliament outlawed the protests and the police reoccupied part of Independence Square, killing two protesters.

On February 7th, the Russians published an [intercepted phone call](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957) between Assistant Secretary of State Nuland and U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt. The intercept revealed that U.S. officials were preparing to seize the moment for a coup in Ukraine. The transcript reads like a page from a John Le Carre novel: "I think we're in play… we could land jelly-side up on this one if we move fast."  Their main concern was to marginalize heavyweight boxing champion Vitali Klitschko, who had become the popular face of the "revolution" and was favored by the European Union, and to ensure that U.S. favorite Arseniy Yatsenyuk ended up in the Prime Minister's office.

On the night of February 17th, Right Sector announced a march from Independence Square to the parliament building on the 18th.  This ignited several days of escalating violence in which [the death toll](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_people_killed_during_Euromaidan) rose to 110 people killed, including protesters, government supporters and 16 police officers. More than a thousand people were wounded. [Vyacheslav Veremyi](http://rt.com/news/ukrainian-journalist-kiev-attack-739/), a well-known reporter for a pro-government newspaper, was dragged out of a taxi near Independence Square and shot to death in front of a crowd of onlookers.  Right Sector broke into an armory near Lviv and seized military weapons, and there is evidence of both sides using snipers to fire from buildings in Kiev at protesters and police in the streets and the square below.  [Former security chief Yakimenko](http://rt.com/op-edge/mercenaries-at-maidan-ukraine-558/) believes that snipers firing from the Philharmonic building were U.S.-paid foreign mercenaries, like the snipers from the former Yugoslavia who earn up to [$2,000 per day shooting soldiers in Syria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Syrian_Army).

As violence raged in the streets, the government and opposition parties held emergency meetings and reached two truce agreements, one on the night of February 19th and [another on the 21st](http://web.archive.org/web/20140221182824/http:/www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/671348/publicationFile/190025/140221-UKR_Erklaerung.pdf), brokered by the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Poland.  But Right Sector rejected both truces and called for the "people's revolution" to continue until Yanukovich resigned and the government was completely removed from power.

**3) The coup d'etat.**

The creation and grooming of opposition forces and the spread of violence in the streets are deliberate strategies to create a state of emergency as a pretext for removing an elected or constitutional government and seizing power.  Once the coup leaders have been trained and prepared by their CIA case officers, U.S. officials have laid their plans and street violence has broken down law and order and the functioning of state institutions, all that remains is to strike decisively at the right moment to remove the government and install the coup leaders in its place.  In Iran, faced with hundreds of people being killed in the streets, Mohammad Mosaddegh resigned to end the bloodshed. In Chile, General Pinochet launched air strikes on the presidential palace.  In Haiti in 2004, U.S. forces landed to remove President Aristide and occupy the country.

In Ukraine, Vitaly Klitschko announced that parliament would open impeachment proceedings against Yanukovich, but, later that day, lacking the 338 votes required for impeachment, a smaller number of members [simply approved a declaration](http://us-russia.org/2174-reveals-ukraine-regime-illegitimate.html) that Yanukovich "withdrew from his duties in an unconstitutional manner," and appointed Oleksandr Turchynov of the opposition Fatherland Party as Acting President.  Right Sector seized control of government buildings and patrolled the streets.  Yanukovich refused to resign, calling this an illegal coup d'etat.  The coup leaders vowed to prosecute him for the deaths of protesters, but he escaped to Russia.  Arseniy Yatsenyuk was appointed Prime Minister on February 27th, exactly as Nuland and Pyatt had planned.

The main thing that distinguishes the U.S. coup in Ukraine from the majority of previous U.S. coups was the minimal role played by the Ukrainian military.  Since 1953, most U.S. coups have involved using local senior military officers to deliver the final blow to remove the elected or ruling leader.  The officers have then been rewarded with presidencies, dictatorships or other senior positions in new U.S.-backed regimes. The U.S. military cultivates military-to-military relationships to identify and groom future coup leaders, and President Obama's expansion of U.S. special forces operations to [134 countries around the world](http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175794/tomgram%3A_nick_turse,_secret_wars_and_black_ops_blowback/) suggests that this process is ongoing and expanding, not contracting.

But the neutral or pro-Russian position of the Ukrainian military since it was separated from the Soviet Red Army in 1991 made it an impractical tool for an anti-Russian coup. So Nuland and Pyatt's signal innovation in Ukraine was to use the neo-Nazi Svoboda Party and Right Sector as a strike force to unleash escalating violence and seize power. This also required managing Svoboda and Right Sector's uneasy alliance with Fatherland and UDAR, the two pro-Western opposition parties who won 40% between them in the [2012 parliamentary election](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ukrainian_parliamentary_election,_2012).

Historically, about half of all U.S. coups have failed, and success is never guaranteed.  But few Americans have ended up dead or destitute in the wake of a failed coup. It is always the people of the target country who pay the price in violence, chaos, poverty and instability, while U.S. coup leaders like Nuland and Pyatt often get a second - or 3rd or 4th or 5th - bite at the apple, and will keep rising through the ranks of the State Department and the CIA.  Direct U.S. military intervention in Ukraine was not an option before the coup, but now the coup itself may destabilize the country and plunge it into economic collapse, regional disintegration or conflict with Russia, creating new and unpredictable conditions in which NATO intervention could become feasible.

Russia has proposed [a reasonable solution to the crisis](http://newsru.com/pict/big/1638517.html). To resolve the tensions between Eastern and Western Ukraine over their respective political and economic links with Russia and the West, the Russians have proposed a federal system in which both Eastern and Western Ukraine would have much greater autonomy.  This would be more stable that the present system in which each tries to dominate the other with the support of their external allies, turning Ukraine and all its people into pawns of Western-NATO expansion and Russia's efforts to limit it.  The Russian proposal includes a binding commitment that Ukraine would remain neutral and not join NATO.  A few weeks ago, Obama and Kerry seemed to be [ready to take this off-ramp](http://www.moonofalabama.org/2014/03/ukraine-us-pulls-back-agrees-to-russian-demands.html) from the crisis.  The delay in agreeing to Russia's seemingly reasonable proposal may be only an effort to save face, or it may mean that the[neocons who engineered the coup](http://consortiumnews.com/2014/03/14/neocons-have-weathered-the-storm/)are still dictating policy in Washington and that Obama and Kerry may be ready to risk a further escalation of the crisis.

The U.S. coup machine has also been at work in Venezuela, where [it already failed once in 2002](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002_Venezuelan_coup_d'%C3%A9tat_attempt).  Raul Capote, a former Cuban double agent who [worked with the CIA in Cuba and Venezuela](http://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/10533), recently described its long-term project to build right-wing opposition movements among upper- and middle-class students in Venezuelan universities, which are now bearing fruit in increasingly violent street protests and vigilantism.  Thirty-six people have been killed, including six police officers and at least 5 opposition protesters.  The protests began exactly a month after municipal elections in December, in which the government [won the popular vote by almost 10%](http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elecciones_municipales_de_Venezuela_de_2013), far more than the 1.5% margin in the presidential election last April. As in Chile in 1973, electoral success by an elected government is often the cue for the CIA to step up its efforts, moving beyond propaganda and right-wing politics to violence in the streets, and the popularity of the Venezuelan government seems to have provoked precisely that reaction.

Another feature of U.S. coups is the role of the Western media in publicizing official cover stories and suppressing factual journalism. This role has also been consistent since 1953, but it has evolved as corporate media have consolidated their monopoly power.  By their very nature, coups are secret operations and U.S. media are prohibited from revealing "national security" secrets about them, such as the names of CIA officers involved.  By only reporting official cover stories, they become unwitting co conspirators in the critical propaganda component of these operations. But the U.S. corporate media have turned vice into virtue, relishing their role in the demonization of America's chosen enemies and cheerleading U.S. efforts to do them in.  They brush U.S. responsibility for violence and chaos under the carpet, and sympathetically present U.S. policy as a well-meaning effort to respond to the irrational and dangerous behavior of others.

This is far more than is required by strict observance of secrecy laws, and it reveals a great deal about the nature of the media environment we live in.  The Western media as it exists today under near-monopoly corporate ownership is a more sophisticated and total propaganda system than early 20th century propagandists ever dreamed of.  As media corporations profit from Western geopolitical and commercial expansion, the propaganda function that supports that expansion is an integrated part of their business model, not something exceptional they do under duress from the state.  But to expect factual journalism about U.S. coups from such firms is to misunderstand who and what they are.

[Recent studies have found](http://publicmind.fdu.edu/2012/confirmed/final.pdf) that people gain a better grasp of current affairs from John Stewart's Daily Show on Comedy Central than from watching "news" networks. People who watch no "news" at all have more knowledge of international affairs than people who watch MSNBC or Fox News. [A previous survey](http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/IraqWMD_Jul03/IraqWMD%20Jul03%20rpt.pdf) conducted 3 months after the U.S. invasion of Iraq found that 52% of Americans believed that U.S. forces in Iraq had found clear evidence of links between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda.  Among Republicans who said they were following "news on Iraq very closely", the figure was 78%, compared with only 68% among Republicans at large.

If the role of the corporate media was to provide factual journalism, these studies would be a terrible indictment of their performance.  But once we acknowledge their actual role as the propaganda arm of an expansionist political and economic system, then we can understand that promoting the myths and misinformation that sustain it are a central part of what they do.  In that light, they are doing a brilliant job on Ukraine as they did on Iraq, suppressing any mention of the U.S. role in the coup and pivoting swiftly away from the unfolding crisis in post-coup Ukraine to focus entirely on attacking President Putin for reclaiming Crimea. On the other hand, if you're looking for factual journalism about the U.S. coup machine, you should probably turn off your TV and keep reading reliable sources like [Alternet](http://www.alternet.org/world), [Consortium News](http://consortiumnews.com/) and [Venezuela Analysis](http://venezuelanalysis.com/).

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