

By Paul Street

From [Counterpunch](#) | Original Article

Is it inherently wrong to ask, "what about" X's crimes and evil when confronted with Y's crimes and evil? Is that "what about-ist" rationalization of Y's crimes and evil? Not necessarily. Not when: one does not cite X's crimes and evil to excuse Y's crimes and evil; X's crimes and evil are relevant to understanding Y's crimes and evil; X's crimes are actually bigger and more far reaching than Y's crimes; acknowledging X's crimes is relevant to stopping Y's crimes.

Take Russian dictator Vladimir Putin's criminal invasion of Ukraine. It is a clear violation of international law and human decency. Putin's forces have laid waste to civilian apartment complexes, schools, and hospitals, causing hundreds if not thousands of Ukrainian civilian deaths along with deaths of untold thousands of Ukrainian and Russian soldiers. None of the Kremlin's grievances against the Ukraine government, the United States (US), and US-led NATO justifies the mass-murderous Russian invasion, with the predictable commission of war crimes (targeting power plants, including nuclear ones, assaulting civilians and civilian targets, etc.) Putin was not forced to descend to this grotesque level. He could have tried to address his complaints through diplomatic, economic, and political channels. War is not the answer.

When a Leftist like myself likens Putin's invasion of Ukraine to the United States' devastating and mass-murderous invasion of Iraq in 2003 or to the US-funded and US-equipped ally and client state Israel's devastating and mass murderous assaults on Gaza or to the US-funded and US-equipped US ally and client Saudi Arabia's devastating and mass-murderous assault on Yemen, I do not do so to excuse Putin's inexcusable crimes but to suggest the wisdom of some "spoken word" voiced by an olive-skinned Mediterranean anti-imperialist peasant-carpenter from Roman times:

"Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." (Matthew

7:3. A translation of this advice I used to hear from relatives as a grade-schooler: "people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.")

Two things to note in this passage from *The Holy Bible*, the text on which US presidents place their hand on the day of their inauguration. First, Jesus does not deny that there's a speck of sawdust in one brother's eye and that it needs to come out. Think of Putin's invasion of Ukraine as the speck in one brother's eye. Second, a plank is a lot bigger than a speck, just as the US-American Empire and its crimes dwarf the crimes of the Putin regime (more on this below).

Make no mistake: Putin is a killer at home and abroad. "Speck" is too mild for his transgressions, some of which were described by Rutgers political scientist [Alexander Motyl five years ago](#) :

"When Putin came to power in 1999, he almost certainly approved, and perhaps even orchestrated, the bombings of two apartment buildings in Moscow, in which hundreds of innocent Russians lost their lives... Putin used the bombings to reignite the Second Chechen War, in which he launched a massive air and land campaign that produced thousands of refugees, reduced much of the Chechen capital Grozny to rubble and killed at least 25,000 civilians... Russia's ruthless bombing of Syria's civilian population and targets has been termed criminal by various Western leaders and human rights organizations... During Putin's years in office, a series of Russian democrats, journalists and opposition leaders have been killed in mysterious circumstances — the most prominent being Alexander Litvinenko, Anna Politkovskaya, Boris Nemtsov, Sergei Magnitsky, Natalia Estemirova, Sergei Yushenkov, Paul Klebnikov, Stanislav Markelov and Anastasia Baburova... Some 12 opposition leaders from various parts of the former Soviet Union have also been killed in mysterious circumstances in Turkey, suggesting Russian assassins may be at work."

Putin's body count has certainly grown since Professor Motyl wrote this indictment 13 days before the Russian head of state congratulated his good fascist friend Donald Trump on his inauguration. (And, by the way, it is naïve to think that Russian realpolitik intervention in the 2016 election had "absolutely nothing" to do with the outcome of that very close contest – the defeat of the "lying neoliberal warmonger" Hillary Clinton.)

It's awful stuff, but it is minor league mayhem compared to Uncle Sam's record of transgression in the post-Cold War era (not to mention during the Cold War). Washington directly and indirectly killed more than two million Iraqis during two invasions, one occupation, and one long and deadly sanctions regime between 1990 and 2012. Washington's invasion and occupation of Afghanistan after 9/11 [killed at least 241,000 people](#). Only time will tell how many tens if not hundreds of thousands if not millions of civilians will die because of US economic sanctions on Afghanistan. Last fall, the United Nations reported that the

US-sponsored death count in Yemen would reach 377,000 by the end of 2021 and would reach 1.3 million by 2030, with 70% of the victims being children under five years old.

Two years ago, [the International Middle East Media Center reported](#) that the US-sponsored Judeo-fascist state of Israel's "forces invading Palestinian Territory have just [killed a 15-year-old](#) unarmed Palestinian boy. A sniper shot him in the head with an expanding bullet. This is the 10,000th Palestinian killed by an Israeli since the round of violence that began in fall 2000. The boy was [reportedly](#) shot in the face." Further:

"During the same period, Palestinians have killed 1,270 Israelis. See the list and details on this [Timeline](#) of Israeli and Palestinian deaths. Because US media rarely cover Palestinian deaths, while often emphasizing Israeli deaths, most Americans are unaware that Israeli forces have killed far more people than Palestinian resistance groups, and that Israel kills first in nearly all cycles of violence. If the situation were reversed, and a Palestinian military force invaded an Israeli town and shot a teenager in the head, it would in all probability be front page news across the U.S."

The US-Israeli slaughter of Palestinians has continued since this report came out. According to the [Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories](#) :

"In 2021, Israeli security forces killed 313 Palestinians, including 71 minors: 236 in the Gaza Strip, 232 of them during 'Operation Guardian of the Walls'; and 77 in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem). Three other Palestinians were killed either by armed settlers or by soldiers who were escorting them; another Palestinian minor was shot by an Israeli civilian and later by Border Police officers; and two Palestinians were killed by armed settlers."

All told, US and US-sponsored murder numbers mark Uncle Sam as global Mafia Boss #1 by far and away. These numbers would be much bigger if it included masses killed by US climate, border/migration, trade/investment, and "regional security" policies in the Americas.

Putin is a lethal but medium-sized mobster by comparison, though with the very significant

caveat that he carries a giant nuclear arsenal around in his pocket – a stash of doomsday weapons that make it impossible for Washington and NATO to march into Ukraine and Russia without likely triggering Mutually Assured Destruction.

Beyond body count numbers, something else merits mention by way of contrast: the US kills, cripples, starves, and sickens people *much further from its own borders than does Russia*. The main Russian killing fields are on its immediate borders and in its regional sphere of great power interest and influence. The 20th Century US Empire built an astonishing body count in Asia from the conquest and suppression of the Philippines through the massive US carpet-bombing of Korea, the US sponsorship of the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia, and the US crucifixion of Southeast Asia between 1962 and 1975. The 21st Century US Empire has concentrated its lethality in North Africa, the Middle East, and Southwest Asia, killing millions from Libya through Iraq, Palestine, Syria, and Afghanistan. And Washington runs an historically unprecedented

global

Empire that accounts for roughly 40 percent of world military spending and maintains more than 800 military bases across more than 100 "sovereign" countries.

Why bring up the plank(s) in Uncle Sam's eye? Two reasons. First, US-Americans look like hypocrites to much of the world when they reject the young Jewish carpenter's advice. Unless and until they drop the epically moronic and monumentally false (one might even say "Orwellian") notion that their nation represents some sort of grand and exceptional model of democratic and humanitarian benevolence (the world's Shining Saxon City on a Hill), they can hardly expect to be taken seriously when they claim to care for peace and freedom in Ukraine or anywhere else. And the world needs people in the world's most powerful nation to be heard calling for peace right now, before more Ukrainians and Russian conscripts die and before the Ukraine conflict escalates beyond Ukraine's borders and becomes a direct confrontation between the world's two leading nuclear powers.

Second, plank-eyed Uncle Sam, whose leaders typically claim to be "Christians," is a major driving force behind the Ukraine Crisis. In cold defiance of promises that the U.S. would help Russia and Europe would enter an era of progressive European peace and cooperation after the collapse of the Soviet Union, US foreign policymakers have led the provocative post-Cold War eastward expansion of the nuclear-tipped NATO military alliance right up to Russia's western front – the very Eastern European corridor that was repeatedly invaded by mass-homicidal Western forces from Napoleon to the German Kaiser and Hitler's Third Reich, which killed more than 20 million Soviet Russians. The leading Cold War architect George Kennan warned in 1997 that such expansion could only trigger disaster. Then US Senator [Joe Biden](#) agreed that same year, saying that the only thing that could provoke a "vigorous and hostile" Russian

response to the West would be if NATO expanded as far as the Baltic states. NATO now claims four Baltic states on Russia's western boarder: Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. A NATO-aligned Ukraine – a reckless US foreign policy goal that the Ukraine government refuses to formally foreswear – would extend the Western military alliance well southwest of Moscow. Love the fascist Putin and the Kremlin (as some campist "leftists" oddly seem to do long after Putin's Russia became a fossil-capitalist gangster kleptocracy) or hate them (as I do from the international socialist perspective), a question remains: how was eastward NATO expansion not certain to "poke the bear" and provoke precisely the ugly Russian reaction that no less of a Cold Warrior than George Kennan himself warned against?

Here is another aphorism from the aforementioned Mediterranean peasant that might bear reflection: "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke 6:31). In the more commonly worded version, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Apply this advice to the world's two top nuclear superpowers and then ask yourself: how long would it take the United States to re-invade Mexico (from which it militarily stole the southwestern United States and California in the late 1840s) or invade Canada if some of its southern neighbor's states and/or some of its northern neighbor's provinces began joining a military alliance with China and/or Russia? Would Washington be justified in murdering thousands of Mexican and/or Canadian civilians in the event of such developments? Of course not. Would the US face the possibility of Russian and/or Chinese military intervention in North America because it invaded Canada and/or Mexico? Certainly not. Any attempted Russian and/or Chinese interference would raise the specter of US nuclear attack, justified in the name of the early 19th Century Monroe Doctrine, which bars non-U.S. military interference in the Americas. Bear in mind that Uncle "We One and World" and "What We Say Goes" Sam has long felt justified in invading other nations, carrying out regime changes, and dictating policy far from its shores.

Meanwhile, I wonder how many US-Americans know that the US in 2019 withdrew from a critical 1987 US-Russia pact in which intermediate-range nuclear weapons – those with a range of 500 to 5,500 km (310 to 3,400 miles) – were banned in Europe. Cable News Warmongers like Wolf Blitzer and Joy Reid seem unlikely to report such provocations while fueling their audiences' hearts and minds with bloodlust over Putin's (very real) crimes in Ukraine.

Significant historical humility and self-examination is much to be desired to help US voices for peace be heard. Right now, the US plank-eyed Blitzer-Reid-FOX War Media is encouraging precisely the opposite mindset. It is crafting a Zelensky Cult and fueling and fanning the flames of war with its one-sided American-exceptionalist coverage of and commentary on the Ukraine crisis, leading three-fourths of the US populace to insanely back a US-/NATO-imposed No Fly Zone over Ukraine.

What could go wrong with Zelensky's call for US/NATO to "close the sky" above Ukraine? Quite a bit. A No-Fly Zone means direct military confrontation between US forces and Russian forces, which means World War III, which means nuclear war, which means nuclear winter, which means terminal mass extinction (global warming would be solved, though).

Question: is the sky closed if there's nobody left alive to see it?

The plank in the eye is not just about domestic policy. US warmongering abroad is intimately related to US capitalist oligarchy, racial oppression, patriarchy and eco-cidal practices at home. How does a criminal imperial nation that is poised to re-impose the menace of forced motherhood on much of its female population while its top top-thousandth possesses as much wealth as its bottom 90 percent think it has anything to tell any other nation on Earth about how to conduct its affairs? How does a nation so racist that its median Black households own less than five cents on the median white household dollar think it is qualified to lecture other powers and peoples on how to run their lives? How does a nation with the world's single biggest per capita carbon footprint and a political class that is leading the world over the eco-extremist climate cliff (with its powerful fossil capitalist faction now trying to exploit the Ukraine Crisis to accelerate the disastrous mass extraction, pipelining, refining, and burning of North American oil, and gas) think it has anything to say about human and policy decency? How does a nation that leads the world in mass incarceration and police state brutality, a nation too reactionary and dumbed-down to respond properly to the Covid-19 crisis ("the world's greatest nation" has been the world's leading covid Sanctuary State), a nation that lets millions of its children live below its pathetically inadequate poverty level while granting more than of its federal discretionary spending to the war machine...does such a nation as that summon the gall to pretend to speak with moral authority to other nations and peoples across this planet? And how does a corporate plutocracy like the US, a nation where *majority public opinion is regularly and indeed routinely trumped by concentrated wealth and power*, think it has any business claiming to defend "democracy" in Ukraine or anywhere else?

Oh war media that interrupts scenes of human carnage in Ukraine with childish insurance and Appleby's commercials (see [this](#)): take those American Exceptionalist planks out of your eyes and try to roll back this horrific mass sentiment for a No-Fly Zone you have helped cultivate, which can only lead to disaster. Try to show and nurture national humility in the name of humanity.

Postscript

Speaking of [Joy Reid](#), to whose commentary Zelensky-worshipping liberals I know are essentially *addicted*, she recently set up a now-standard cable news cult segment on Zelensky with a brief account of the Nazi Jewish Holocaust in Ukraine that deleted the participation of many Ukrainians in the mass murder of Jews in Ukraine. Relying just on Reid, you'd think it was just Germans who killed Jews in Ukraine. Actually, however, the Nazis made a point of recruiting and empowering Ukrainians to kill Jews in Ukraine, Poles to kill Jews in Poland, and Lithuanians to kill Jews in Lithuania. A Romanian activist living in the US wrote to say this about Reid's little history lesson:

"This was unhelpful...for the next few months, every leftist and every liberal — and every one of us Eastern Europeans living in the US —who wants to discuss the complex history of Ukraine will have to argue with misinformed folks who exclusively depend on people like Joy Reid. Besides erasing the roles of domestic Ukrainian fascists in WWII, I can't even start with how infuriating it is — especially as an Eastern European — to once more see Eastern European's peoples' own struggles and organization against fascism (both in Ukraine and in many other Eastern European countries) be erased under quick first-world attempts to flatten all our histories for easy consumption. In broad enough strokes a lollipop and a tree are very similar."

Meanwhile, here are some numbers that might be relevant in deciding whether or to get behind a No-Fly Zone, which means getting behind WWII, which means getting behind nuclear war:

World population = 7,953,952,577

Ukraine population = 43,192,122 = .00543 of *homo sapiens*.

My point is not that it's okay to sacrifice the people of Ukraine. My point is to demand *negotiations and peace now*.

We must end this war. Another bit of scriptural advice for the self-declared church-going Christian Joy Reid, who needs to save her soul by rejecting the kind of war-fanning reporting and commentary that could help close the sky for good: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." (And I'm not even religious.)

The Russian people need to rise up against their parasitic ruling class oligarchs, fossil capitalists/capitalist fossils and war pig police state. The US-American people need to rise up against their own parasitic ruling class oligarchs, fossil capitalists/capitalist fossils, and war pig police state. The people of the planet need to rise up against the bourgeois-imperialist system that generates war, police statism, fossil-capitalist ecocide, and parasitic class rule the world over.

Paul Street's new book is [*The Hollow Resistance: Obama, Trump, and Politics of Appeasement*](#)