

Ukraine, Empire, and Forever Wars with Matt Hoh, Larry Wilkerson

Panelists: Lawrence Wilkerson, Matthew Hoh

Moderator: Sasha White

Description: Discussion about the war in Ukraine and the power and influence of censorship and propaganda.

Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson is a retired army colonel and former chief of staff to Colin Powell. He served 31 years in the US Army and worked as a distinguished adjunct professor of government and public policy at the College of William and Mary, and taught National Security Affairs in the Honors Program at George Washington University.

Matthew Hoh is a Marine Corps veteran and former Department of Defense and State Department official. In 2009, Matthew resigned from his post in Afghanistan with the State Department in protest against the American escalation of the war. He was also a Green Party candidate in 2022 for the US Senate in North Carolina. He is the associate director of Eisenhower media network which ran a full page ad on May 16 in the New York Times, urging diplomacy and not more war in Ukraine.

Transcript

Sasha: Hi everyone and welcome to the panel on Empire, Ukraine and Forever Wars as part of the Plebity free speech and the left conference. Today I'm joined by Larry Wilkerson and Matthew Hoh to discuss our topic.

So before we get into the discussion I will just briefly introduce our panelists.

First, we have Colonel Lawrence Wilkerson who is a retired army colonel and former chief of staff to Colin Powell. He served 31 years in the US Army and worked as a distinguished adjunct professor of government and public policy at the College of William and Mary, and taught National Security Affairs in the Honors Program at George Washington University.

Matthew Hoh is a Marine Corps veteran and former Department of Defense and State Department official. In 2009, Matthew resigned from his post in Afghanistan with the State Department in protest against the American escalation of the war.

He was also a Green Party candidate last year 2022 for the US Senate in North Carolina. And he's also the associate director of Eisenhower Media Network which ran a full page ad on May 16 in the New York Times, urging diplomacy and not more war in Ukraine.

So to quickly introduce our topic.

There's of course, the geopolitical situation today which you both speak about regularly, which include our never ending imperial wars, US bases all over the world, the new Cold War with China, and of course the war in Ukraine, but the geopolitics all takes place within the context of a propaganda war.

And there's always this tension between freedom of information and the official control of information, and that is the aspect of the war in Ukraine specifically that we'd like to focus on today.

So this morning's news. The day of our panel today, about the war in Ukraine, is that Kiev carried out drone strikes against civilian areas of Moscow, which was the first attack to hit civilian areas in Moscow. And meanwhile Russian drone strikes have been bombarding Kiev and killed one person last night in what appears to be a significant escalation.

So let's open our panel by commenting on that and let's start with Colonel Wilkerson, we get your comment on that let's start with your reaction to what's going on today.

Col. Wilkerson: I think what we're seeing is exactly why we put our piece in the New York Times to try and combat or to begin to arrest these sort of tendencies. And that is a tit for tat ratcheting it up of what we're doing, whether it's a small tit or tat, and it kills people thousands of miles away from the combat zone as it were, or whether it's a big thing like what's happened with some of the nuclear reactors in Ukraine which is very very dangerous.

It's still things that are leading to escalation if not escalation itself, and that's extremely dangerous.

I once had an individual who I won't name, but it was a powerful individual in the government who really in my view at the time he said this didn't really have a dog in the fight because he'd actually left government. But he'd served three presidents, and he'd been in the White House on and off for about 40 years.

And he said to me, "Larry there's one thing you don't want to do, since we exploded the nuclear bomb. You don't want to have a fight or a war or a situation of escalation with another nuclear power ever. And that's been the guiding principle for me during the Cold War." he said, meaning the Soviet Union and the US. I think that's a very sound principle.

It's a different ballgame, when you have two heavily vested and, you know, when people say Russia is not a superpower I say they're a superpower as long as they have 6000 nuclear warheads, and the ability to hurl them all over the world, including submarines perhaps the most dangerous element of it.

So as long as that's there. We have a real dangerous escalation potential.

Sasha: Okay, so potential for serious escalation. Matthew your comment.

Matt: Right, that's, that's where this goes. And what it does is an escalation like this it emboldens the other side it pushes the other side, you know, immediately after these drone strikes on Moscow, you had many many people in the Russian government and the Russian media, the Russian social media sphere, urging for harsher, more aggressive punishing action on Kiev because of because of these attacks, you know, and this is the nature of it, escalation does exactly that, it escalates, and you know people who have studied this and have written about it, they speak often about the escalation ladder, how you either go up or you go down- there's no side to side on escalation, and this is what occurs.

What is Russia's response going to be to this, it's going to be to strike harder at Kiev. Vladimir Putin actually has a very large contingent to his right, politically, that have been pressuring him, pushing him. There's, you know, you can read this speculation that this invasion that Russia launches 15 months ago, had a lot to do with Russian domestic political politics where Putin had to really show that he was the central authority he was in control in that, those who were trying to be tougher than him could not be tougher than him.

And we see that here in American politics, right in our domestic politics, toughness is what so often is what defines a campaign, and you look at, you know, and so you can understand those pressures, but with this escalation exactly where does it go? What does it lead to? And you have the very real possibility of this escalation leading to a large conflict that goes outside of Ukraine, outside of Russia. And if that occurs, then you have this danger that other nations are brought in, and then the escalation continues.

So, this is one of the reasons why we put that out in the New York Times, why we work so hard, why we speak like this, is to try and get us off of this escalatory climb into a place where diplomacy can bring about de-escalation, which could lead to ceasefire negotiations and an end to this war.

Sasha: So you both advocate for sort of at least a discussion, a better discussion around the escalating and in the US right now there's been such a strong overwhelming outpouring of support for Ukraine, to the point where the country's flag is being displayed all around, and even, I mean for example in my small town, local police department last year they flew the

Ukrainian flag for several months, which was something I had never seen before in my life with any other country's flag.

So my next question is basically about that, about the narrative that we have here in the US, how would you describe that and we'll go to Colonel Wilkerson first, what would you say is the acceptable mainstream narrative about Ukraine in the US, or in the West, generally.

Col. Wilkerson: I basically feel like I'm back in Citizen Kane and Orson Welles playing him and William Randolph Hearst and the media essentially helping the politicians wage their wars. Indeed, as Hearst himself said, I'll get you a war, you tell me where you want it, and I'll get it for you.

That's what we have with the media right now led by the flagship newspaper the Gray Lady, the one we put the "advertisement", they labeled it, in the New York Times.

I've read...I've almost quit reading the Times because of this, it happened dramatically with the war that I was most intimately involved with, the Iraq War, where the New York Times was the warmonger that Cheney would quote, Vice President Cheney would quote when he would give speeches.

They seem to have taken a tack that the country is very responsive to as you just indicated. Look at Johns Hopkins University this past week. Zelensky gave the commencement address there, and a very successful address it was if you look at the reviews, appealing to all the things that in this country have made this a very easy thing for the media to do because these are white Christians.

"Oh my god" one person said to me, "we finally have some white Christians we can support. Let's do it, let's go all out." Forget about China and Russia for a minute, although this is all about Russia, we can support Ukraine.

The media is just hyping that. They're playing with that, they're using that. And all I can do is say it's the crass attempt at ratings, and to save, in some cases, the media source doing it because the internet and other mechanisms are eating their lunch in terms of the American people's attention.

And so they, whatever they can lead with that's what they lead with. This is very popular. And that's tragic, you, you watch Julian Assange being prosecuted under the espionage act, you watch the other things that have happened with regard to that sort of action by the government. And you see these two pressures, the pressure of the people wanting to read something they like, and the media corresponding there with and feeding that want.

And then on the other hand, the suppression and even punishment of those who might want to report the truth. This is a dangerous combination and it's not the combination a democracy needs.

Sasha: So the propaganda machine kind of using all this to prop itself up, even as it also pushes the war effort. Matthew, what do you want to add on that?

Matt: Yeah, it's a, it's presented as a morality tale. This is a straight up Manichean conflict of good versus evil, particularly when context is left out any historical timeline is left out, background is left out, and the start date for the history of this war in Ukraine is a sign you know late February 2022. It's a very simple tale to tell, Russia invades Ukraine.

This is a tale that is familiar to Americans; it reminds them of the Cold War, and more importantly reminds them of World War Two.

And it has an explanation, and a synthesis, a way about it. that was absent from our wars in the Muslim world, so the global war on terror, where the storylines fell apart rather quickly and became muddled and weren't so clear and of course the lies rose up and so what we were led to believe about Afghanistan became befuddled and, of course, with the Iraq War as well.

Those morality tales evaporated very quickly. And then we spent 20 years in those wars, where the government's propaganda was effectively to keep those wars hidden, not talk about them, but this is a tale that can be portrayed as a struggle of good versus evil.

Again, it has remembrances of World War Two, it has remembrances of the Cold War, it taps into the American psyche and it taps into the mythology of good wars, right, which absolutely is a myth, the idea that there are good wars.

So, it is a tale I think that the major media outlets have so readily rushed to, because these are stories that people want to read, stories that people want to hear, these are stories that make people feel good about the United States and its role in it.

And of course you have all the add ons to that, the relationships to the weapons companies, the relationship to the fossil fuel industries all the things that brought this war about and sustain it.

Well, that's all on the aside, the main thing that can be spoken about in this war through the mainstream media again is this morality tale which makes for an easy way to sell the war, and an even easier way to beat down any dissent against it.

Sasha: So there's this, there's a portion of the American population who will just eat all that propaganda up because, as you pointed out, it speaks to some kind of deeper value they hold

or a myth, they believe in or something. But for people who genuinely want to know the truth and just the truth, how can we parse this information from, you know, just genuine attempts to seek the truth? We have, as you both pointed out mainstream platforms, pumping out this narrative. And then we have them also saying to be wary of disinformation, and to be wary of independent media.

So, how do we actually try to differentiate between disinformation and alternative sources of seeking the truth or attempting to

Wilkerson: Yeah, let me add something to what Matt said there. Increasingly, as I'm checking the data, we are not winning over the hearts and minds of the global community. As a matter of fact, because of OFAC's official list of 32 countries, I think it's more like about 60 countries, indirect and direct sanctions of countries that we are really hurting, I mean really hurting with sanctions, draconian sanctions.

Those people don't particularly care for us. And if you add up those countries, it's about two and a half to 3 billion people depending on which countries you put in the list, just OFAC's list is about 2.8 billion. So that's the Office of Financial Assets Control that more or less looks over our sanctions and manages them.

These people aren't necessarily in sync with us on Ukraine, and they certainly aren't in sync with us on our neglect of the climate crisis and what it's doing to them already. They see us as the guilty party here. We have produced this crisis and aren't doing anything really substantial to help them. I was on a webinar yesterday about the \$11 billion that Joe Biden promised to help the global south, so to speak. \$1 billion has been allocated and almost none of it's been spent.

They know this. They track this stuff. So this is not helping us really with this considerable portion of the world that is beginning to distance itself from our policies, and even to abhor our policies.

And Ukraine to them is not an issue that is of concern, not when you have war in the Sudan, you have war in Eritrea and Ethiopia, now war in Somalia, probably our fault too because we've militarized Somalia, war all across the Sahel with the Wagner group participating and the French having deserted it. The only place they're left is Cote d'Ivoire.

So the rest of the world, so to speak, a sizable portion of it doesn't look on Ukraine the way the American public does. And this is growing dangerous too because we are losing much of the world. And who are we losing it to? And I'm not one for wanting war with China, but basically we're losing that part of the world with China because China is very astute and is picking that up and doing what it can to win and influence the hearts and minds and such of those people who are abandoning us.

Not a good time for the empire, all in all.

Sasha: So internally, we may have, you know, this overwhelming support for Ukraine, but from the outside, we're looking like the bad guys, as you're saying.

Wilkerson: Except for Europe, and I don't think that's going to last because a huge component of what we're doing, a huge component of what we're doing is, and it's in some desperation, to try and reestablish US economic hegemony over Europe.

Germany particularly, the motor of Europe, if you will, was turning more and more to China. Indeed, Ukraine was planned to be an intrepot for China's base road initiative. It was going to be the intrepot for China's initiative ending in that portion of Europe. And that's been terminated, more or less, by what's happening. And that was our purpose. That was our economic purpose and pretty soon the Europeans will figure this out.

The Germans are not stupid. They'll figure this out. They'll get rid of the governments that we largely have engineered, to include the Secretary General of NATO, whom we got into where he is. Very tortuous process. I was present at the beginning when we started it. We put him into position. These governments and these institutions and their individual leadership are our product and they are going to go away as the Europeans grow increasingly discontented with US re-establishment of its economic and other hegemony over Europe.

I think it'll take a year, maybe two, and then you're going to see a rupture in the transatlantic alliance. And Ukraine is going to be a part of that rupture while today everybody's saying it's a unifier. It is not ultimately.

Sasha: And do you think that once that happens, do you think that internally in the center of the empire, people will still continue to believe these myths about our role or will people kind of wake up to that? We can go back to Matthew for now.

Matt: Well, I mean, to your initial question, Sasha, about how do you find the information? It's a lot of work. And, you know, both Larry and I do this full time. And that's what we spend our time doing. You have to, I could say in the 30 years that I've been doing this professionally, roughly, and Larry, you know, longer in your case, right? I've never seen anything like this in terms of the propaganda, in terms of the amount of work you have to put in to assemble that Venn diagram where you can see the truth, where you can take all these different sources and, okay, here's where they overlap, okay? And this is what's consistent.

You know, and the other thing too is the type of media we have these days where it's so heavily invested in telling the story of that day. And so the idea that you're going to miss the forest for the trees, that you're all going to get it all caught up in what happened today in Ukraine versus what the trends are.

You know, what's been happening these last several months? What does it look like for these last 15 months? Okay, that tells you where it's going. And that's a lot of work to do that. So it's very easy for people to be misled, for people to be manipulated. Again, the whole storyline of this war is a very emotional one. So it's very easy to, you know, pull people the direction you want them to.

I mean, I have conversations with friends of mine, fellow veterans about this war, and they feel, and their knowledge might not be that deep on it as they would like, and they'll say flat out, like, this war makes me feel good. This is a war that I feel like I could take part in. And then when they get more background on it, more history, then they say, well, that doesn't make much sense, or that doesn't seem right, or, oh, no, you're absolutely right. Where is this heading to?

You're absolutely right. There's no way the Ukrainian military can win this conflict. There's no way that the Ukrainian army can remove the Russian army from its territory. It's just not going to happen without a NATO army. And I mean, an actual NATO army, three to five corps of mechanized infantry and armor units coming into Ukraine is going to get Russia out.

And if that's the case, then why do you prolong this? Why do you continue with this if they're, you know, if your entire strategy is almost, if it's built upon some faraway hope?

And, you know, but that is a conclusion that you come to only by really digging into it, understanding it, reading and watching lots of different sources.

And, you know, and the problem is, too, because, again, it's heavily propagandized on all sides. I mean, the stuff coming out of Russia is just as bad as the stuff coming out of Kiev. So you can't, how do you tell what is the actual ground truth? And again, that takes time, that takes effort, you have to sit and watch and notice the trends.

But to Larry's point, though, where I think you've seen the world outside of Europe and the US and I guess Korea and Japan and Australia, their rejection of the US, the US role in the world, the idea of this unipolar world, the notion that they have to pick a side, that comes not just from being told you have to follow us on this Ukraine war, that comes from decades and decades, particularly since the end of the Cold War, the last three decades, of an American abuse, American lecturing, American military adventurism.

You know, there is a quote, and I can't remember which African leader said this, but he said, you know, when you talk to the Chinese, you end up getting a port or some roads or a new hospital. When you talk to the Americans, you get a lecture and they offer to put commandos and drones in your country.

I mean, so that's basically how we've been acting the last decades. And so I think if you look at how the international community is viewing the war in Ukraine and to Larry's point, they're not being supportive of the US policies. They've not jumped on board with the sanctions. They are not roundly condemning, they are not falling in line with the United States' military victory policy for Ukraine. Right. So they're urging negotiations. You're seeing things, you know, on a separate line, but it all comes to the same point.

This notion of sanctions particularly, you saw President Lula of Brazil the other day castigating the Americans for what they've done to Venezuela. So, I think that where the US wants to be the leader and feels that its leadership is something that's entitled to them because it won the Cold War, well, that's three decades gone now. And all the sanctions, all the wars have forced other countries to say, look, if we align ourselves with the US, this is where it's going to take us to.

And so I think that that astute kind of understanding of where US policy leads is why so many nations have decided that Ukraine is not something we're going to be on board with the United States and its partners in Europe and in Asia, you know, because it doesn't make any sense to us.

Sasha: It's really interesting to hear you say that you had fellow veterans who said this is a war they could feel good about. And it's a sentiment I've heard from, you know, friends, other Americans who say that's kind of how they felt.

They thought, you know, there's so many things dividing us right now and this is something that can actually unite us as Americans. And I was a little surprised to hear that from certain people I know, especially considering, you know, and this is the Free Speech Conference, and these are friends who I talk about free speech with all the time and other issues that might get them criticized by the mainstream sort of narratives.

But this one, it seems so many people are just fully on board for it. And then I do want to go to Colonel Wilkerson about that, about the disinformation topic, and I'll just add. Do you think that the kind of the term disinformation itself or the propaganda we get that tells us, you know, don't read certain things, don't look at certain sources. Do they use the word disinformation to actually bolster their own narrative?

I mean, and then, you know, certainly is there also a danger of real misinformation or disinformation?

Wilkerson: I'll tell you a story. You can believe it or not. It's true. In 2002, I dispatched one of Colin Powell's speechwriters whom he was dissatisfied with. He'd been a speechwriter for Ronald Reagan and was constantly claiming he coined the phrase evil empire. I don't know who actually did that, but I don't think it was this particular individual.

But he was a pretty good speechwriter, except he was very, very neoconservative, like in his interpretation of policy issues. And Powell was not that way. And so I sent him to DOD. Well, he became a spy for me because I sent him off with grace and favor. I didn't, you know, say you're fired. I just sent him off.

He tells me a story one day about Admiral John Poindexter, who you may remember was involved in Iran-Contra and was actually, I think, reduced one grade from vice admiral to rear admiral because of his participation in Iran-Contra.

He was national security adviser to Ronald Reagan at the time, of six that Reagan had. John was in an office called Strategic Information Operations in the Pentagon. The moment this individual related this to me took me back to my moments in the Pentagon when I had vehemently objected to propagandizing the American people. I had done it within the P.A. office of the Pentagon with the assistant secretary for public affairs and all across the joint staff.

I thought I'd been reasonably successful and I thought my boss at the time, Colin Powell, had been reasonably successful in tamping this down. Well, here I'm learning that John Poindexter is running an office in the Pentagon called Strategic Information Operations, expressly aimed at propagandizing the American people and using such techniques as putting articles on the Internet in English. That should give you an indicator, in Baghdad or in Sydney or in Tokyo or wherever, and then propagating them back over the Internet into the United States and using them throughout the United States to propagandize the American people.

Maybe it wasn't technically propaganda when it was given to Iraqis or it was given to Australians, but it was damn sure propaganda in the domestic audience and there's a law against that.

And so Rumsfeld is compelled to go over to the Senate Armed Services Committee and reveal what he's doing. Well, as soon as he does, the senators who know the law, there are a few left, jump up and tell him stop it immediately. OK, I find out that the Congress has so instructed the Secretary of Defense and think the issue is perhaps settled.

A couple of weeks later, I get a call from Tony and he says Rumsfeld came back and changed the sign on the door of Admiral Poindexter from SIO to IO. So it went from Strategic Information Operations to Information Warfare, which was copacetic, honest and decent.

But they kept on propagandizing the American people, and I will tell you, they've been doing it ever since. Now, this is just the Pentagon. A major effort to sell the wars because they realized, some of them, that Vietnam was in part, in their view, lost because they didn't capture the media and make it molded to their wishes.

Never again would that happen. So there's this strong effort in the Pentagon still to do this. I suspect it's elsewhere in the government.

Sasha: Matthew, do you want to add to that?

Matt: I mean, I think a lot of it has to do with our failure to understand the other side. You know, there's stories from American veterans of the wars in Europe that the shock they had when coming across the German soldier that is killed, realizing that soldier had a belt buckle that said, you know, *gott mit uns*, you know, God is with us. You know, this idea that how could God, how could they feel that God is with them? I mean, they're an evil side. What we're doing here, we're fighting against evil. How could these people think God is with them?

You know, you see that in memoirs, both, you know, from American veterans, kind of this shock at this reality faced with this notion that maybe the other side is like us. Maybe, you know, so that we have to understand, I mean, one of the things we look at in, as we mentioned before, this advertisement we placed in the New York Times, what we did with the two things.

One, we had a text, of course, arguing basically about diplomatic malpractice out of the curb for decades, the absence of diplomacy that led to war and the need of diplomacy to end the war.

But then also, too, we included a timeline of events leading up to Russia's invasion, as well as concluding a map. And the map was a map twofold, one that showed what it looks like when you fill in all the bases in Europe, North Africa, West Asia, NATO bases that surround Russia.

And then we did a second map where we imagined what would it look like if Russian bases were surrounding the U.S. So you have bases all through Canada, all through Mexico, all through the Caribbean. What would that look like? And we simply titled that, what if the shoe were on the other foot?

So this ability to see the perspective of your adversary, of your enemy, you know, of your opponent, your competition, you know, concept is called strategic empathy.

One of the first things that Larry and I were taught as, you know, Larry as an Army officer, I was a Marine Corps officer, is that you put yourself in the perspective of the enemy.

So if you dig a fortification, if you build a fort, so to say, or trenches, you need to go out and look at it from the enemy's perspective. If you're writing what's called an Operation Order in the Marine Corps or the Army, really the second thing after saying what you want to do, what the purpose is, the second thing is to put what is the enemy's most likely course of action and the enemy's most dangerous course of action.

Not how many troops you have, not how many bullets you need, not what you're going to do or how you're going to do it. That's how important it is to understand the other side. It's primary. You can't get away from that.

And so I think as we talk about the propaganda and how it's effective here in the U.S., we have to also realize how effective that propaganda is in Russia. And so you brought up my veteran friends who feel like, whoa, this is a war I could be part of. Unlike what we did in Iraq and Afghanistan, where I didn't believe what we're doing, here it's clear cut.

Well, if you were to put them in the same perspective as Russians, I think their attitudes would be similar. And I think the numbers we hear about support of the war in Russia are true. I think the popularity of Vladimir Putin at 70 percent or so is accurate. If you look and see how the Russian government and Russian media, it's a controlled media, how they have been portraying this war, they describe it as a war of self-defense.

And if you say you look at the Russian military recruiting ads that they're utilizing right now, those same ads, if used in the United States, would be very effective, right? Challenging young men, basically. Will you take up weapons to defend your country? Are you going to defend your family and your community? You know, just as your great great grandfather defended against Napoleon, just as your great grandfather fought against the Kaiser, your grandfather fought against Hitler, we need you now to defend your homeland.

I mean, so the propaganda has to be understood by both sides and how effective it is in its usage. And that nut to crack, then, of course, is very difficult.

But this is the reason why we have conversations like this. And this is the hope I have for the fact that we have technology that allows us to do these things. 10 years ago, five years ago, this might not have been possible to do a forum like this.

And so that's where I get my hope is that, you know, the more we communicate with each other, the more we can disassemble that propaganda that's used by both sides for their purposes.

Wilkerson: Just to add, you asked the question previously and then your questions that you sent ahead of time. There are people out there who are doing exactly what Matthew has just described.

Now, John Mearsheimer might not be accurate, I think personally, and I've said this to John on occasion, that he is a little bit too enraptured with his theoretical constructs of realism and he can't get out of those constructs.

That's typical academic though, I know I was one.

But you can listen to him and John basically gives this description of the other side, if you will, that we tried to portray in our New York Times piece. And I think is accurate. And so there are voices out there.

There are very scholarly, trained, educated voices out there saying what the realities are. I think much closer than what our media is. So it's not like there's a dearth, a total dearth of information for people. It's just not the sexy information.

Sasha: Right. And it's not usually not in the New York Times. Right. So unless people like you sort of get it in there on a rare occasion.

But what about sort of if something is the same as Russian propaganda, does that mean we have to instantly dismiss it?

Like, for example, the idea that Russia is saying that there are Nazis in Ukraine and that may be Russian propaganda, but it also has truth to it.

So how do we, I guess, talk to people about something like that, where it is propaganda. It is Russian, it is a Russian talking point, but it also happens to have truth to it.

We want to go to Matthew.

Matt: Yeah, I mean, again, it's this kind of idea of the effort that needs to be put into it and the understanding one assembling a Venn diagram and then of course not losing the forest because of the trees.

And you can see the effectiveness of the propaganda.

Well, let me say you just had in these last week or two cross border raids by Ukrainian forces into Russia. These are supposedly done by ethnic Russians volunteer forces, but one of the leaders of...but they have very real ties to the Ukrainian military.

They're actually I think these guys day jobs were in the Ukrainian military, and they were using American equipment, American vehicles to launch these raids into Russia. You know, and the leader of one of those groups is a very well defined Nazi, you know, I mean it there's no question about that. That type of flagging of him as a Nazi certainly helps the Russian propaganda effort, if you will, and propaganda in the sense of getting their side out, nothing to do with truth or not truth, but just getting people to side with them, right? Getting people to go along with them.

I mean, so, and certainly if you go back and look at say, how is the Russian public view this war, and now they see these cross border raids, led by a Nazi, which is what Vladimir Putin when he

launched this invasion 15 months ago said one of the primary objectives was to denazify the nation.

So this gives some credence to that that gives some credibility to it. Oh wow these Nazis really are going to attack us just like again my grandfather fought against the Nazis now maybe I have to as well.

You have these drone attacks that took place, you know, in Moscow, you've had attacks all throughout Russia, whether it be assassination attempts, there's been sabotage, train derailments, the Kerch bridge connecting the Russian mainland to Crimea was blown up, all these different events have occurred that only serve to strengthen the will of the Russian people, just in the same way that our bombings of Vietnam, and we dropped more bombs on Vietnam, than we did in total during World War Two.

That did nothing to weaken the Vietnamese right. If you look at the Russian attacks on Ukraine over the last 15 months, that has done nothing to weaken the will of the Ukrainians. In fact, if you look at public polling, and you look at the issue of joining NATO, where before the Russian invasion, Ukraine was roughly split on that issue. Now, 70-80% of Ukrainians believe in joining NATO right. I mean so often when you do these military actions, you do not have an effect on your enemy, like you say you will, you don't weaken their will you don't, you know you don't denigrate the resolve you don't push them towards negotiating.

In fact, the opposite usually occurs. So I think we try to understand the propaganda value of all this, you have to look at who takes the most away from that. And oftentimes the propaganda is for internal consumption, you know, and this notion that if just because something...not to answer your question because I realized I really didn't answer your question.

The point being though is that yes there can be things said by the Russians that are true, just as there are things said by the Ukrainians or the British or the Americans that are true, but whether or not the focus of that usage is to gain support or just inform is something I think you have to develop an eye for. Right, so how is that information being utilized, how's it being put forward, how's it being manipulated?

And the thing about it too is that so much we only hear one side of the story on these things. So very often you hear about a, you know, one side will state how many it's killed of the other side, without mentioning at all how many of their own have been killed, so you do have to continually go back and look at the information try and glean from all sides to get an idea, just a speck of what actually may be occurring.

Wilkerson: That's a good point that Matt just brought up. I had a really intense discussion with a professor at Catholic University recently, who maintain that the Ukrainians were winning, and all

I did was just a simple, simple comparison of how many Ukrainians, how many Russians, how many time zones, how much lack of time zones, how much depth, how little depth.

And how can you say that the Ukrainians are winning, maybe in spirit and elan and verve and passion for the war, after all you're defending your homeland, but not in terms of fundamentals that truly count. And anybody who maintains that Ukraine is winning or has the potential to win even a pyrrhic victory is just adding to the nonsense that will get more people killed.

Matt: You know one thing to point out in the terms of propaganda, it doesn't just flow out to the public, it flows within the governments, in between governments. So if you go in and look at the leaks from the discord leaks as they're called, the leaks put out by that young man from the Air National Guard of Massachusetts a couple of months ago, the kid who put it out on the servers to impress his friend or whatever the story is.

And if you look at some of those pages, you'll see there are footnotes. And again, these were slides that were used to brief the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and, and you'll see there are footnotes and some of these slides that basically say, this information comes from the Ukrainians. We don't believe it, we're changing our methodology.

Right, so when you see reports about who is, how many Russians have been killed, very often if you find the source for that, it comes from the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense. In the same way too, if you're to look at the Russian information it's wildly, you know, off in terms of what you could kind of gain or glean on your own. In the same way this happened all throughout the United States wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, of course, and then Vietnam, the idea of the body count.

You know this idea that somehow you present the data in such a way to show that you're winning, because what matters is the people who are receiving that data, believing it. Not whether that data actually has any real, is any real reflection of what's occurring on the battlefield, and on the trend of the war.

You know, I have friends of mine who, several years ago, because every year the United States would say that there were 100 al Qaeda operating in Afghanistan. And this went on for a better part of two decades this this 100 al Qaeda, and these guys sometime around 2012 or so, went through all the different reports from the headquarters in Afghanistan and from Central Command, and they tallied up all the number of people that we killed saying that who we said were who the US said were al Qaeda, and the number just mounted into thousands upon thousands right, demonstrating that there's no truth to any of this, but that perception is what matters.

And who are you trying to perceive that in Afghanistan, the importance was not actually defeating, to maintain the war there to keep it going. The importance was not defeating the

Taliban on the battlefield. The importance was to keep the American public more importantly the American Congress and the American media on the positive side of the war.

So you had to demonstrate progress, you had to show that we are winning, show that we are killing people. Right. And so this is something that's as old as, as, you know, history is in the sense of propaganda reporting back and letting people know how great your victories are, but it is it's something that it's a challenge because if you go and you look at what has occurred in Ukraine, the number of Ukrainians the Russians say they have killed, the number of Russians Ukrainians that they killed mathematically just makes no sense, but also to this idea that so many people, to Larry's point, don't understand the basics of it, again the size of Russia. The fact that they can produce so much, the fact that they have put such an effort in the last 10 years preparing for this war, whether it's to avoid the sanctions, protect themselves financially, or to build out their industrial base so that they're not capable of artillery shells or rockets or missiles, unlike how in the West is unable right now to support the Ukrainian military with enough rockets and artillery shells and missiles.

I mean, so these are the kinds of things I think a lot of people are absent, and as I think there's a lot of reasons for that. You know there's a lot of different explanations for why the media is so poor on this, there's a relationship between the media the banks that own everything. The fossil fuel companies that can't be denied, but then there's also the rare real limitation that you only have so much column space that you have to put something in a two and a half minute television piece.

And so I think there's a disservice too in terms of how we deliver media to people that prevents them from knowing or understanding fully what's occurring.

Sasha: So, we'll start to wrap up on this last question which is about free speech, and this conference, the purpose of this conference is to sort of reclaim the value of free speech for the left considering that it is a traditional leftist value but the the state of the left today is very much, there's a lot of cancel culture there's a lot of silencing censoring, self censoring.

It doesn't mean that, you know not all of our panelists are on the left, but it's sort of geared towards having that discussion among leftists who really should be valuing free speech more, so have either of you faced any backlash for being sort of voices a reason on this issue, have you encountered any attempts at censorship, and also have you observed colleagues or, you know, others around yourself censoring on this?

Wilkerson: Interesting question for me. Yes, is the answer.

I don't pay much attention to it anymore because I'm retired, I'm out of any function of government and I don't have any reason to worry about it. I've had the FBI call on me a couple of times. One time, I just about wound up throwing them out of my house because they were

very very unprofessional. And it was absolutely specious what they were claiming about my association with Code Pink. Are you kidding me. I said to one of them.

Interesting conversation there, but I don't feel, I don't feel the pressure like I would probably if I were still in government, and I feel for people who want to tell the truth are still in government I recommend a book to you by Tom Mueller called *Crisis of Conscience - Whistleblowing in an Age of Fraud*.

And he has a chapter in there on the nuclear industry inside the United States that will frankly scare you to death. Because the complicity between Department of Energy, Department of Justice, Bechtel engineering company the primary nuclear engineer in America, a group that does nuclear waste in America, 95% of it, most of it west of the Mississippi in terms of its disposal, and Hanover and Washington are blossoming Chernobyls, unquestionably they are.

And the American people know nothing about this, absolutely nothing about it, but I recommend to people that they read the book and many shy away from it for that very reason.

So, yeah, there's pressure. I look at what's happening to Julian Assange right now. Well, I think we had the fifth Belmarsh tribunal on five or four March, maybe in Sydney, I went to the one at the National Press Club here in Washington, I didn't hear a voice at that tribunal that disturbed me, in terms of one, they're telling the real story, and two, they're telling the truth, as they saw it and it was fundamentally my truth too, and the dangers that it presented to any, any government pretending even to be a democracy, as we do.

We have a tough time ahead if we're to survive the next 10-20 years, a really tough time, not just because of nuclear weapons and the climate crisis but because we are destroying our republic.

Sasha: Matthew.

Matt: Yes, absolutely. You see that you see that just in trying to get this letter published and we asked for people to sign on to it. There were people who agreed with it but would not sign on to it. Because it was too much, too soon, too quick.

And one of the reasons why we did this letter in the New York Times was to try and open space to be, and there are people who are arguing, like Larry said, there's there's not a dearth of folks out there saying this, but we were trying to create a space in a mainstream publication, getting out of our bubble and into someone else's bubble, so to speak, to show things, to inform, present ideas, thoughts, timelines, contexts that are left out so often.

But this idea of self censorship, certainly you see that quite a bit. You see people who are afraid to go just too far. If Ukraine and military matters are not a person's thing it's not the

organization's thing. Why stick your neck out why, you know, lose any capital you may have on an issue that's not germane to your issues, you know, and this is even within the foreign policy community so people who will focus on Asia say may not say speak as forcefully about what's happening in Europe, because they feel well, I'm going to lose space on this.

I don't need to stick my neck out on this. This is not my bailiwick, you know, so you see that type of self censorship, you see the very real censorship in the mainstream media of course.

We have had studies after studies. The Intercept just did one last year. But you know really since around 2012-2013 there's been a dramatic hand re-handling of how particularly the cable news media handles and depicts these wars.

And again, since the war in Syria, the war in Afghanistan, the war in Ukraine, you see that the studies show that 80 to 90%, probably more of the people who go on the air and pontificate who talk about these wars the pundits, either are directly or indirectly paid for by the military industrial complex. Many times they're directly paid for by the Pentagon or the CIA or the State Department through the think tanks they work for, or they're indirectly on the roll of Lockheed or Raytheon or Boeing, because those think tanks fund...those weapons companies fund those think tanks, or perhaps they're even on the board of directors for those companies and of course those things are never disclosed.

And again we see nine out of ten people who are talking about these wars being financially dependent upon them, so when they come out and say the answer is more weapons, more war, we shouldn't be surprised.

And of course, the relationship, you know, to discuss this Paul Jay was supposed to be here with us today. And Paul talks about this so well and I know Larry has talked with him before, it's where I learned it, I learned it from Larry and from Paul, this idea about the connection, the relationship between the banks that own 95% of the principal shareholders and 95% of the S&P 500.

Right, so you have this relationship that exists then because between the media companies, between the arms companies, between the fossil fuel companies, because they're all owned by the same five or six banks. You know, via them being their principal shareholders. So you have that as well.

But then you also have the desire for patriotism, and the best I can relate is a number of years ago. I met Michael Steele who was the former Republican National Committee chairman. And if you remember Michael Steele he was always putting his foot in his mouth, always causing controversy, always making other Republicans upset with him.

And I spoke to him he said you know what the most grief I ever got was when I agree with Barack Obama on the Afghan war, and this would have been in 2011, I believe summer 2011 and Barack Obama said we need to begin pulling our troops out of Afghanistan and Michael Steele said yes, I agree we need to get out of the war. And he said he had dozens of Republican members of Congress from the House and the Senate call him and say, yes, you're absolutely right. But you can't say that.

Right. I mean, so there is this underlying motif that exists that you're going to be unpatriotic, you're not going to support the troops. We just came through Memorial Day, which is just one propaganda explosion for militarism. And so, I think, you know, understanding all the various aspects that lead into this censorship is important, but again I'll go back to what I said earlier, it's forums like this, it's a technology we have, it's the idea of where is that technology going to go that gives me hope that we can have a better educated, better informed public than we do now.

Sasha: Well, let's leave it at that for today.

Thank you both so much it was a wonderful discussion and I think it gave our viewers hopefully a lot to think about, and I really appreciate both of you coming on here and talking to us today but also just consistently advocating for the truth and for I mean, considering that some people didn't want to sign, I think that really shows it takes a certain moral courage to put that out there, so thank you again and we'll leave it at that for today.

Wilkerson: Thanks for having us.

Matt: Thanks, Sasha.