

BREAKING! IN NYT OP-ED, VLADIMIR PUTIN FAILS TO DISCLOSE PHD

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As you've no doubt already read, Vladimir Putin published an op-ed in the NYT last night, one in which he lectured Obama (in Christian terms) that no one should think of theirs as an exceptional country.

My working and personal relationship with President Obama is marked by growing trust. I appreciate this. I carefully studied his address to the nation on Tuesday. And I would rather disagree with a case he made on American exceptionalism, stating that the United States' policy is "what makes America different. It's what makes us exceptional." It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation. There are big countries and small countries, rich and poor, those with long democratic traditions and those still finding their way to democracy. Their policies differ, too. We are all different, but when we ask for the Lord's blessings, we must not forget that God created us equal.

And while NYT identified Putin's potential conflict in giving such a lecture ...

Vladimir V. Putin is the president of Russia.

... It did not reveal that the thuggish dictator has a PhD on the importance of energy in Russia's future.

I mostly raise that because a key figure in John Kerry's case for war, Elizabeth O'Bagy, got

fired yesterday for lying about having a PhD. Kerry had used her work to make claims that the Syrian rebels are a whole lot more secular and peace-loving than, according to House Homeland Security Chair Mike McCaul, our own intelligence community believes them to be.

Meanwhile, amid complaints from at least one reader about the op-ed, NYT's public editor provided an explanation (without, however, disclosing that Ketchum is the PR firm that contacted the NYT).

The Times editorial department was approached Wednesday by an American public relations firm that represents Mr. Putin, offering the piece. At the same time, Mr. Rosenthal said, Mr. Putin's spokesman had called The Times's Moscow bureau with the same purpose in mind.

Mr. Rosenthal agreed to review the article and quickly decided to publish it. It was posted on the Times Web site by Wednesday evening.

"I thought it was well-written, well-argued," he said. "I don't agree with many of the points in it, but that is irrelevant."

[snip]

Rosenthal said there was no way of knowing whether Mr. Putin himself wrote the article – "with a public official you can never know," because they tend to have staffers who write their speeches and other communications. But, he said, it needed virtually no editing and went through almost no changes. "It was an amazingly good translation," he said.

Guess what?!?!

Our foreign policy caters to interest groups of all sorts. No matter the pretty stories we cloak

it in, it is ultimately about serving someone's interest (and that interest is increasingly second-hand for the average citizen of the United States). And while Putin didn't admit to his PhD, he was clearly presented as the leader of a foreign nation.

Any arguments about foreign policy are going to be driven by the public influence industry, whether it's a DC think tank or a giant PR firm. (Which is why you should support an independent site like Emptywheel!) Like it or not, Putin's case on most issues save who launched the CW attack on August 21 holds together better than the US case thus far (Max Fisher fact checks it here; while I absolutely agree with his claims about Putin's hypocrisy, I do question his trust in US assurances).

For that reason, among others, the thuggish Doctor is correct. The US would be well-served to stop cloaking its interest-based policy choices in the tawdry exceptionalist claims that worked – more for media reasons than fact – for the second half of the 20th Century (during precisely the period when Putin's country improbably claimed to be the champion of oppressed workers). We have spent the last 12 years making it clear we don't abide by those exceptional principles. And frankly, our arguments for or against war would be far stronger if we didn't try to use that crutch. (The people who seem to object most strenuously to Putin's op-ed seem to be those who cling to this myth most desperately.)

After 12 years, in any case, Americans have become well aware such myths don't deliver them personal benefits.

We are, supposedly, a democracy. And if the Administration wants to bring us to war (but not in the "classic sense," Kerry insists), it would do well to make a stronger argument than the thuggish Doctor.

Disclosure: Marcy Wheeler has a PhD that makes her an expert in, among other things, how the

*entrancing avenger Count of Monte Cristo helped
pave the way for authoritarian Louis Napoleon.*