

# Psychohistory News

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## *From Islamic State to Kiev: Apocalyptic Fantasy and American Power*

by Brian D'Agostino



Captain America

On the eve of September 11, Evil—Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIL or ISIS), addressed himself to a television audience of several billion people spanning each of the planet's six inhabited continents and its nearly 200 countries. The United States, he said, will lead a global coalition and take unilateral military action to destroy the world's latest incarnation of

The forces of Good will “degrade and destroy” the radical Sunni organization, which Obama likened to a cancer, by hunting down and killing its leaders and fighters wherever they try to go. This will protect and advance the

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## BOOKS

*In the Name of the Father: the Bush Years  
and the Legacy of Childrearing Violence, p. 2*

*LITTLE FAILURE: A MEMOIR, p. 3*

### **The Disheartening Life of Ferguson's Michael Brown** by Gilda Graff

An unarmed 18-year-old black man, Michael Brown, was shot and killed on 9 August 2014 by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, a St Louis suburb which is about two-thirds African-American. “There are grieving parents and a seething community” (Blow, 2014). The ongoing investigations may clarify the conflicting

accounts of what led to the shooting, but the context, the state of race relations in the United States 150 years after the Civil War, needs to be understood.

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### THE IPA BOARD OF DIRECTORS IS PLEASED TO WELCOME MARC-ANDRÉ COTTON AS OUR NEW INTERNATIONAL VICE PRESIDENT.



Marc-André Cotton is a teacher, scholar, and co-director with Sylvie Vermeulen of the French website *Regard conscient* ([www.regardconscient.net](http://www.regardconscient.net)), dedicated to exploring the unconscious motivations of human behavior. He is also the author of the book, *In the Name of the Father: the Bush Years and the Legacy of Childrearing Violence*, currently available only in the French edition (*Au nom du père : Les années Bush et l'héritage de la violence éducative*. Paris: Editions L'Instant Présent 2013). *Psychohistory News* asked Marc to say a few words about his book, which appear below. We are currently looking for a press interested in publishing an English translation and welcome any suggestions. Contact Marc at [marc-andre.cotton@wanadoo.fr](mailto:marc-andre.cotton@wanadoo.fr)

#### *In the Name of the Father: the Bush Years and the Legacy of Childrearing Violence*

(Editions L'Instant Présent 2013)

In the wake of the 9/11 trauma, most Americans succumbed to the Bush administration's military buildup for a so called "war on terror" and takeover of Iraq with its vast oil wealth. The torture program implemented in Guantanamo, Abu

Ghraib and various "dark sites" around the world showed what exceptional means US leaders were ready to take to achieve their political ends. But such an aggressive posture goes far beyond the short-sighted appetite of greedy state capitalists: there are deeper, unconscious motivations at issue.

In this book, I search for and clearly document these unacknowledged motivations, found both in America's ruling class and in the

general public, which quickly accepted drastic restrictions on civil liberties in the name of "national security." Just as so many Americans learned to submit quietly in childhood under the threat of corporal punishment, they acquiesced as adults to the brutal agenda their leaders were willing to stage internationally. This is a case study of the roots of unconscious adult motivation in early childhood trauma.

## BOOK REVIEW

***Little Failure: A Memoir***  
**by Gary Shteyngart**  
 New York: Random House, 2014

**Reviewed by Merle Molofsky**

Gary Shteyngart was born in Leningrad in 1972, emigrated with his parents to the United States in 1979, has written three highly acclaimed novels in English – of course – and, just shy of turning 42 years old, published another highly acclaimed work, a memoir, *Little Failure*. There is something remarkable about his publishing a memoir at such a young age – and the memoir itself is an illuminating entrée into the mind of the novelist, the mind of the novelist whose life story is so essential in forming his novels.

The titles alone of Shteyngart’s novels are a clue to the writer who wrote the novels – in the order in which they were published: *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*; *Absurdistan*; *Super Sad True Love Story*. The title of the memoir also is a clue to the child who became the writer whose ironic, deeply humorous, acutely observant response to the strange people who inhabit planet Earth and who puzzled, fascinated, and alienated him during childhood and adolescence, until he alienated himself further with protracted adolescent enactments – a clue to the formation of a brilliant writer who transcended emotional suffering.

Sigmund Freud’s “The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious” (also translated as “Wit and the Unconscious” by A.A. Brill) (Standard Edition, 1905) offers us a platform for understanding the power of Shteyngart’s wit in both his fiction, and his memoir. Freud tells us that both humor and dreams represent unconscious wishes. Freud offers a number of examples of witty wordplay. Shteyngart’s writing exemplifies witty wordplay. The ability to play with words is the ability to mix together what ordinarily might be kept separate.

Having lived in the United States as an exchange student, I bring firsthand experience of American culture to this study, combined with my European background and perspective. I carefully assess the influence of George W. Bush’s childrearing on his policy choices and the

Shteyngart had to “mix together” language as an immigrant child, making a transition in identity from Igor to Gary, making a transition from Russian to English, while attending a religious Jewish school, Hebrew school, a school he could not have attended in Russia. We discover him his first day in Hebrew school, commanded to chant – or, as he says in the memoir, “wail”, the essential Hebrew prayer, “Sh’ma Israel, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echod”, which he cannot read nor understand, with an English translation, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one”, published on the opposite page – which he cannot understand.

“One thing is certain – along with Mommy and Papa and one sweet kid, the son of liberal American parents who have induced him to play with me – the Russian language is my friend. It’s comfortable around me.” (p. 105).

And the little boy who is learning English, and Hebrew, learns to write, to tell stories with words, to entertain the mysterious American boys. Once upon a time, at the age of five, in Russia, he wrote a novel, “Lenin and his Magical Goose”. In America, his father tells him outlandishly amusing stories too -- “The Planet of the Yids”.

The title of his memoir reflects an amalgam name his mother bestowed on him – Russian-English hybrid word, “Failurchka”. He disappointed his parents, did not become a scholar, became a dissolute adolescent and young man, a substance abuser, a dedicated right wing conservative, and, eventually, liberating himself from anyone else’s definition of who he is – a brilliant writer.

Discover him. Read his life story to date, his memoir – and his novels.

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underlying root causes of an on-going dynamics in which America, perceiving the whole world as a threat, creates the very conditions of its decline.

–Marc-André Cotton

## APOCALYPTIC FANTASY

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Good, epitomized by American values. The president noted in passing that the US was also mobilizing its European allies to defend not only Kiev but all of Eastern Europe from Russian aggression, further establishing America's unique moral and heroic status.

This speech is what apocalyptic fantasy looks like, though to all the Americans and others caught up in the fantasy it seemed like the model of sober and responsible leadership. Meanwhile, to the world's jihadis and their many sympathizers, who also span the globe, it only confirmed America's status as the Great Satan and their own unique role as God's warriors, who will triumph in the end against overwhelming odds precisely because God is on their side.

Thus was the world ensnared by a potent group fantasy to act out in reality a tragic and interminable destruction of lives and resources. President Obama, on the anniversary of Osama bin Laden's greatest triumph, unwittingly paid the most fitting possible tribute to the jihadi leader. The latter's triumph was not, as is commonly thought, the destruction of the World Trade Center as such. Rather, it was the "War on Terror" that 9/11 provoked, the apocalyptic war that bin Laden knew the jihadis would win because it would be fought on their home turf. All he had to do was lure the Great Satan into the apocalyptic field of battle and God would do the rest; it was precisely that successful provocation that bin Laden accomplished on 9/11.

## The Challenge for Psychohistory

What can we as psychohistorians do to counteract this state of affairs? The first step is to not get caught up in the group fantasy ourselves, which is easier said than done. Several psychohistorians I know seem unwilling or unable to confront the aggressive nature of NATO's post-Cold War expansion in Eastern Europe. Rather than acknowledge that aggression and incorporate it into their picture of the West, they project it onto Vladimir Putin and turn him into the archetypal Aggressor. Others who I know, practicing psychoanalysts, repeatedly denounce radical Islamists such as Hamas and ISIL as the embodiment of Evil while exonerating the Israeli and American governments of any major role in the region's political violence.



Flag of Islamic State

Such thinking is a measure, in my opinion, of the work that is cut out for us. We need to build on pioneering studies in this area such as Marc-André Cotton's *In the Name of the Father: the Bush Years and the Legacy of Childrearing Violence* (Editions L'Instant Présent 2013; see summary on page two). Chuck Strozier et al examine the psychology of radical Islam in *The Fundamentalist Mindset: Psychological Perspectives on Religion, Violence, and History* (Oxford 2010) and Howard Stein's "Jewish Identity: a Shared 'Chosen Trauma'" (*Journal of Psychohistory* 41, 4; Spring 2014) sheds new light

on apocalyptic Zionism. Others have explored the role of perinatal trauma in apocalyptic group fantasies, notably Richard Morrock in *The Psychology of Genocide and Violent Oppression* (MacFarland and Company 2010) and of course Lloyd deMause in *Foundations of Psychohistory* (1982; available at [www.psychohistory.com](http://www.psychohistory.com)).

In the remainder of this essay, however, my task will be more modest—to pose some questions that can help separate fantasy from reality. Then other psychohistorians, building on the above-mentioned studies and other relevant research, can provide a psychodynamic analysis of the fantasies themselves and the traumas out of which they arise. I will end by sketching what a reality-based US foreign policy might look like.

## Separating Fantasy from Reality

A reality-based world-view, in contrast to apocalyptic thinking, does not divide the world into "us" and "them," where the former are equated with Good and the latter with Evil. But rejecting such dualism does not entail moral relativism—far from it. In my ethical universe, torture, wars of aggression, and the killing of civilians are always bad and democracy, gender equality and respect for differences of religion, race, and sexual orientation are always good. What makes me non-apocalyptic is that I apply these same ethical standards to "us" and "them." This can only occur when I recognize that "we" are not archetypal heroes beyond reproach and "they" are not archetypal villains fit only to be destroyed.

Imagine, for example, if the Soviets had won the Cold War and rather than disbanding the Warsaw Pact, they expanded it into Latin America,

bringing state after state into the now unnecessary military alliance and projecting Soviet power to America's very borders. If such policy would constitute aggression, then so did the US promotion of NATO expansion into post-communist Eastern Europe. Such thought experiments—asking “how would *we* like it if *they* did this or that”—are as fundamental for understanding international relations as for interpersonal relations.

Similarly, if dictatorship is evil then this cannot apply to some dictators, say Saddam Hussein, and not others, say Hosni Mubarak or Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, depending on their relationship to the United States. If nuclear weapons are too destructive for Iran to have, then how can it be acceptable for Israel and the United States to have them? Finally, if beheading people for political reasons is a heinous crime, then how can that apply only to IS and not also to Saudi Arabia, which has done it for decades, and on a much larger scale?

### Reality-Based Policy

I turn now to the question of what a reality- and values- based US foreign policy might look like. Among other things, it would withdraw the United States from the role of world policeman and the expectation that this country is uniquely entitled to unilateral uses of force. To fill the power vacuum thus created, the US needs to promote effective institutions of collective security (see also [www.globalactionpw.org](http://www.globalactionpw.org)). This would include repairing relations with Russia in the interests of a unified UN Security Council. The latter would then be empowered to undertake timely humanitarian intervention, for example, to prevent genocidal acts by IS or any other state or non-state actor.

A demilitarized US foreign policy would include phasing out the US-dominated and obsolete NATO and empowering the European Defence

Agency to fill the vacuum. This could well defuse the crisis in Ukraine, but if Russia continues to menace Kiev the solution is not to militarize Europe but to equip Ukraine with the non-offensive capabilities it needs to deter attacks on its territory, such as anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons. It would include phasing out military aid to Egypt and Israel and replacing it with locally controlled civilian economic development aid intended to eradicate poverty in Palestine and the entire region. Only this can remove the conditions in which terrorist organizations and a politics of despair flourish. It would include normalizing relations with Iran in exchange for Iranian commitment to the security of Israel.

So what about the Islamic State? I don't feel informed enough on this subject to comment with much confidence except to say that there appear to be no magic bullets. In the short term, some kind of multilateral military response may be needed, similar perhaps to the kind President Obama indicated—US air support for local and regional “boots on the ground.” If indeed that is the best response, however, it is essential that it be recognized for what it is—at most a stopgap measure that will only produce a new generation of jihadis if not accompanied by a broader shift to a new, demilitarized foreign policy paradigm of the sort proposed here.

The conditions that created the Arab spring—Western backed dictatorships and corrupt monarchies that have lost all legitimacy with ordinary people—have not fundamentally changed, and future instability in the region is certain. It is essential that the West stop supporting these regimes and identify responsible groups—including religious reformers who are reviving Muhammad's and the Quran's authentic message of peace and justice—that enjoy popular support. (About these reformers, see

Reza Aslan, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*). A proactive Western policy of channeling economic development assistance to such groups with no strings attached can help build the civil society needed for a democratic future in the Middle East. Continued reliance on a militarized foreign policy, by contrast, will ensure the continued ascendancy of violent jihadi groups.

**As-salamu alaykum**

مكّي لع مال سلا

**Peace be upon you**

The foreign policy agenda I have sketched here will of course be dismissed out of hand as utopian by hawk and so-called “realist” elites. But these are the same people who have been in power and whose policies have failed miserably in the real world. Only a progressive mass movement demanding a demilitarized foreign policy can turn the tide. Any president committed to such an agenda—and Barack Obama could be such a president if pressured by a progressive mass movement—will of course be denounced as a wimp. Machismo is therefore another psychohistorical issue that must be confronted as we seek to fashion a post-apocalyptic policy discourse (see my “Self-Images of Hawks and Doves,” *Political Psychology* 16, 2). Helping create such a discourse is a task for which the psychohistory community is well suited.

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## FERGUSON'S MICHAEL BROWN

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In the weeks following the shooting, the U.S. Justice Department took an important step when it opened a broad civil rights investigation into police practices in Ferguson. The New York Times believes that this investigation should not be limited to Ferguson because it appears that St Louis County police may be "systematically targeting poor and minority citizens for street and traffic stops (in part to generate fines), which has the effect of criminalizing entire communities" (NY Times, 2014).

St Louis County contains 90 municipalities, some of which get 40 percent or more of their revenues from traffic fines and fees for petty violations. A 2013 report by the state attorney general found that black motorists in Maplewood were searched or arrested during stops at more than twice the rate of whites - even though searches of blacks and whites were similarly likely to turn up contraband (NY Times, 2014). Lawyers at Arch City Defenders say their clients who were unable to pay the fines were illegally jailed and lost their jobs and housing as a result (NY Times, 2014).



August 2014 Protest in Ferguson, Missouri

In addition to questionable police practices, St Louis has a long history of friction between white and black residents. It sits near the midpoint of the Mississippi and thus "on the seam between the North and the South" (Von Drehle, 2014 p. 15). Missouri was one of the four slave states that never seceded from the Union. By 1896, or even earlier, all Missouri schools were segregated (Loewen, 2005). The Dred Scot case of 1857, "began in St Louis as a question of whether a man's human rights evaporated when he crossed the border into a slave state. In the decades since, few cities have taken a more

systematic approach to racial separation" (Von Drehle, 2014, p.15).

This approach included a zoning law that limited where blacks could buy homes, restrictive covenants forbidding whites to sell their homes to black buyers, and redlining (Von Drehle, 2014), which excluded black people from most legitimate means of obtaining a mortgage (Coates, 2014, p. 58).

In addition, Missouri has an "extraordinary" number of sundown towns, at least 200 (Loewen, 2005, p. 67). What is a sundown town? It is any organized jurisdiction that for decades kept African Americans or other groups from living in it. Sundown towns arose between 1890 and 1940, and some displayed signs saying "Niggers! Don't let the sun set on you in this town" as late as the 1990's (Loewen, 2005).

I have mentioned only two of the many humiliating circumstances that make life difficult for African Americans-questionable police practices and segregation. There are many more. What is the impact of all these on the psyche of young black males? What is it like to grow up with this background? Michael Brown's mother told a local television station after her son was killed just weeks after his high school graduation:

*Do you know how hard it was for me to get him to stay in school and graduate? You know how many black men graduate? Not many. Because you bring them down to this type of level, where they feel like they don't got nothing to live for anyway. "They're going to try to take me out anyway"(Blow, 2014).*

Jesse Jackson said, "There's nothing more painful to me than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery - then look around and see somebody white and feel relieved (Kristof, 2014)."

Clearly, blacks internalize the beliefs fostered by our racist culture.

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## ANTI-IMMIGRANT GROUP FANTASY

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2001; Martínez et al. 2004) Studies show that immigration has a negative effect on violence at the neighborhood and metropolitan levels (Lee et al., 2001; Martínez 2002, 2006; Martínez et al., 2004; Martínez, Rosenfeld, and Mares, 2008; Ousel and Kubrin, 2009; Wadsworth, 2010). Wadsworth (2010) found, for example, that cities with proportionally larger increases in recent immigrants were characterized by the greatest reductions in homicide and robbery between 1990 and 2000.

This research-based picture, by separating fantasy from reality, can provide a foundation for interesting and important psychohistorical research on xenophobia in America today. It also has far-reaching implications for public policy. Contrary to the anti-immigrant group fantasy, to reduce crime, the U.S. government should give more green-cards to undocumented immigrants, not fewer.

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# Exploding the Anti-Immigrant Group Fantasy

## by Ariel Goldberger Blau

In the years since 9/11, a xenophobic group fantasy has gripped a large segment of the U.S. population and driven irrational and highly counterproductive immigration policies. In the imagination of fearful nativists, illegal immigrants as a group are increasing crime and the threat of terrorism in the country. The remedy, it is thought, is to enact draconian immigration laws and deport all the undocumented immigrants. In this article, I provide a research-based picture against which to measure these ideas.

History shows how immigration law has become a tool for preserving white privilege and controlling the racial make-up of the country, while operationalizing the definition of citizen as white and European (Chacon, 2007). Undocumented immigration was first criminalized in the United States as early as 1929, validating and contributing to such notions (Chacon, 2007). Exacerbated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks, current group fantasies around national security and immigration continue this pattern.

The 2004 Republican Party platform, for example, conflated national security concerns and white paranoia towards immigrants when it called for measures to ensure that the immigration system was structured to address "the needs of national security" (Republican Party, 2004). In the 2012 platform, in the same xenophobic stance, irregular migration, crime committed by non-citizens (or those perceived as non-citizens) and terrorist threats are all subsumed under the broad rubric of "national security threats" (Republican Party, 2012). In a report by Bean et al. (as cited in Hagan, & Palloni, 1999) the authors find that: "... many people believe that undocumented aliens are the source of the increase in serious crime . . . and that the increasing number of undocumented aliens is due to the U.S. Government's inability to control the border." Immigrants are consistently shown as prone to violence, to making a living in illicit ways, and to be a threat to public safety due to menacingly growing numbers. These distortions apply especially to Hispanics, erroneously perceived to be the fastest growing group and, hence, more menacing to nativists. Is the connection between crime and Hispanic immigrants real?

Promoting immigration, rather than reducing it, has a positive effect in the reduction of nationwide crime. When immigrants move into deteriorating communities,

they strengthen relationships among residents, invigorate local ethnic economies, and re-energize community institutions such as churches, schools, and immigrant-focused agencies (Lee, Martinez, and Rosenfeld 2001; Martinez 2002; Martinez, Lee, and Nielsen, 2004). Nielsen & Martínez (2011) explain the positive effect of immigrants as revitalizing neighborhoods and fortifying crime control. Studies of immigrants' contribution to the drug trade show that this group does not have a major impact different than any other, and that economic exploitation and lack of job security may have an impact on the rates of petty crime in young Hispanics.



"THEY SAY THEY'RE BUILDING A WALL BECAUSE TOO MANY OF US ENTER ILLEGALLY AND WON'T LEARN THEIR LANGUAGE OR ASSIMILATE INTO THEIR CULTURE..."

Hagan & Palloni (1999) found that illegal immigrants are less likely than citizens to be involved in drug crime and that criminal justice organizations tend to provide flawed statistical analyses of immigrants and crime. Available data tends to be skewed. For example, it needs to be adjusted for age (a significant factor in that crime tends to be higher in the group aged between 15 and 25), and for a differential treatment of Hispanics, such as higher subsection to pre-trial detention rates. When these factors are accounted for in the data analysis, Mexican immigrants, for example, are generally found, as a group, to do as well and sometimes better than U.S.-born citizens.

Regarding violent crime, the actual impact of immigrants is exactly the opposite of what xenophobic Americans imagine. Communities with large shares of immigrants tend to have lower levels of violence than similarly situated neighborhoods with few immigrants (Lee et al.