

SCOTT RITTER: Trump's Munich Strategy

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At the security conference in Germany we just saw Trump make a classic adaptation of John Boyd's OODA-loop to destroy his NATO and EU enemies.



Outside the 2025 Munich Security Conference, Bayerischer Hof, Feb. 14. (Courtesy MSC/Daniel Kopatsch)

“The man’s enlarged my mind. He’s a poet-warrior in the classic sense. I mean sometimes he’ll, uh, well, you’ll say hello to him, right? And he’ll just walk right by you, and he won’t even notice you. And suddenly he’ll grab you, and he’ll throw you in a corner, and he’ll say do you know that “if” is the middle word in life?

If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, if you can trust yourself when all men doubt you – I mean I’m no, I can’t — I’m a little man, I’m a little man, he’s, he’s a great man. I should have been a pair of ragged claws scuttling across floors of silent seas...”

—Unnamed photojournalist, *Apocalypse Now*

By [Scott Ritter](#)

Special to Consortium News



Lately I have been asked to try and make sense of Donald Trump and the first three weeks of his presidency.

And, more specifically, to comment on the drama that unfolded in Munich these past few days.

As I stumble through the mental gymnastics of trying to explain the unexplainable, my brain takes me to the classic Francis Ford Coppola film, *Apocalypse Now*, and the character of the “unnamed photojournalist” played in manic fashion by Dennis Hopper.

In a world strewn with freshly killed villagers, with war-painted murderers dressed as soldiers posturing in the background, Hopper’s character tries to tell a disbelieving Captain Willard (played magnificently by Martin Sheen) that the madness he sees around him represents a portal to a higher plane of thinking.

Just don’t pay attention to the truth your eyes are dispatching to your brain.

“The heads,” the unnamed photojournalist tells Willard. *“You’re looking at the heads. Sometimes he goes too far. He’s the first one to admit it.”*

The unnamed photojournalist is derived from the character of the Harlequin in Joseph Conrad’s classic novel, *Heart of Darkness*, from which Coppola fashioned the warped narrative of *Apocalypse Now*.

The Harlequin is a Russian sailor who served as Kurtz’s only European companion in the months leading up to the arrival of Marlow’s steamship. What Marlow sees as evidence of insanity, the Harlequin explains away as part of Kurtz’s grand design, incomprehensible to anyone who hasn’t lost his own mind in the detached reality of Kurtz’s universe.

When asked to explain Trump, I feel like I have been cast into the character of the Harlequin, asked to interpret the unnamed photojournalist’s ramblings to a world of disbelieving and unknowing Marlows and Willards.

Trying to explain what happened the past few days in Munich is like trying to explain an acid-infused trip down the rabbit hole with Alice.

You can’t.

Especially to those who didn’t drop the tab and join you on that magic carpet ride.

“Understanding Trump” is an exercise in futility for those who still choose to see the world through a prism of what passes for normalcy.



Trump's motorcade arriving for the Daytona 500 at the Daytona International Speedway in Florida on Sunday. (White House Photo, Daniel Torok)

Who believes in norms defined by established practice?

There is nothing normal about Trump.

And he is breaking with established practice at a pace that belies comprehension.

There is no more room for established practice.

It's a revolution, baby.

And if you do not understand that, then nothing makes sense.

I have been riding the Trump magic carpet for some time now, convinced that the alternative to this journey into America's heart of darkness was nothing short of nuclear Armageddon.

I didn't drop the acid.

I am the equivalent of Marlow and Willard, except I have the longevity of a Harlequin or the unnamed photojournalist when it comes to seeing patterns in the chaos.

I have been partaking in the Trump trip since 2015.

And here is my take.

Munich Security Conference 2025



U.S. Vice President J. D. Vance addressing the Munich Security Conference on Feb. 14. (Courtesy MSC/ Lennart Preiss)

The Munich Security Conference (MSC) is an annual conference on international security policy that has been held in Munich since 1963.

Its motto is “Peace through Dialogue.”

While the MSC attracts a global audience, it caters almost exclusively to the trans-Atlantic crowd, the acolytes of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

The role of the United States has been to serve as an overbearing mentor, nodding approvingly from the front rows of the audience, and dispatching high-level officials to speak to their European minions from the podium of power.

The MSC is an audition of sorts, where Europe’s political and security elites scramble to share the stage with a member of the American establishment who will pat them on the head, feed them a treat, and tell them what a good job they’re doing.

In the post-Cold War era, Europe allowed itself to be uniformly influenced by this master-servant dynamic.

The MSC was born from the pragmatic caution exhibited by its founder, Ewald-Heinrich von Kleist-Schmenzin, a co-conspirator in the plot undertaken by Count Claus von Stauffenberg to assassinate Adolf Hitler in 1944. Von Kleist envisioned the MSC as a forum to promote peace in Europe, to use dialogue as a mechanism to prevent a future European war.

Von Kleist’s vision, however, faltered in the face of America’s post-Cold War ambition to sustain its role as the world’s sole remaining superpower, using trans-Atlantic and European institutions

such as NATO and the EU as facilitators for continued U.S. hegemony through the uninterrupted implementation of the “rules-based international order.”

The hypocrisy of the West — NATO, the EU and their overlord, the U.S. — was masterfully called out by Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2007, during his brilliant presentation at the MSC.



Putin addressing the Munich Security Conference in 2007. (Kremlin.ru, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/))

But the elites who gather at the MSC are not there to be lectured to, or to learn, but rather to promulgate the strategic objectives of the U.S. by disguising them as European initiatives born of European values.

Except, as anyone who has studied the dynamics of the MSC knows — there are no true European values anymore. The once laudable goal of avoiding a repeat of the Second World War on European soil has been replaced by a mindless, slavish echo chamber of American imperial warmongering.

Serbia. Libya. Afghanistan.

Ukraine.

The MSC has become nothing more than a rubber stamp for American foreign and national security policy.

European values today are nothing more than a veneer of artificiality, the equivalent of a spoon full of sugar to help Europeans swallow the bitter reality of their collective servility.

Any student of America, however, would have picked up on a growing discontent among the American people with the endless wars being promoted and promulgated by the so-called Military Industrial-Congressional Complex (MICC) that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned about in his farewell address of January 1961.

The American establishment allowed itself to be consumed by the predatory practices of the MICC.

The American people did not.

And starting in 2016, the American people began to let the establishment know that they were not going to stand for these predatory policies, which infected every aspect of American life, anymore.

The Trump Revolution began in 2015, when he came down the escalator of his Trump Tower castle to announce his candidacy for the office of president of the United States.

And it hasn't stopped since.

Trump destroyed the corrupt edifice of classic Republican politics by sweeping the Republican primary in 2016.



Trump at a campaign rally in Phoenix, October 2016. (Flickr Gage Skidmore)

His victory in the 2016 presidential election sent a shockwave through the establishment, which spent the next four years undermining the Trump Revolution from within and without.

And the next four years, under the auspices of its poster child, Joe Biden, the establishment used every tool in the establishment bag of dirty tricks, (including politically motivated prosecutions on multiple fronts and, possibly, assassination), to prevent a Trump resurrection.

But the revolution was real, something the establishment opted not to believe, and Trump — against all the odds — won a second term as the most powerful man in the world.

Except this time, he had learned the lessons of the past.

That he could only trust those people who came from his personal orbit, and not the past servants of the deep state.

That the institutions of power that were deeply cast within the body of the massive unelected bureaucracy that guided America regardless of who was at the helm of executive power were the enemy.

And that, as president, he had virtually unlimited power to enact the change the American people were demanding.

The OODA-Loop

Trump appears to have incorporated aspects of John Boyd's OODA-loop into his strategic thinking.

Boyd was an Air Force fighter pilot who believed that if you took control of an aerial engagement — a dog fight — by making the opponent react to you, then you would win every time.

Boyd called this “getting into the decision-making cycle” of the enemy, which he broke down into a four-phase cycle he called the OODA-loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act).

If you could implement the OODA-loop faster than your enemy, then you were “inside” his decision-making cycle.

And they would die.

The key aspect of the OODA-loop is the “loop” — this wasn't a one-time exercise, but a series of connected actions, each feeding off the other.

You took an action and then observed the enemy's reaction. You orient on the reaction, and decide which option is best before acting.

The enemy now reacts.

And the cycle repeats.

Until the enemy dies.

The goal is not to let up once engaged, to keep the enemy reacting to your actions until you have them where you want them.

In Munich we see the classic adaptation of the OODA-loop by Trump to destroy his NATO and EU enemies.

Now, at this juncture, some might ask, “Wait a minute. How did NATO and the EU become the enemy of Donald Trump?”

The answer is quite clear — because they are an extension of the very establishment elites Trump has declared war on in America today.

These are the European elites who conspired against Trump during his first term, who pined for former President Barack Obama while delaying enacting Trump-mandated reforms in the hope that the American electoral cycle would purge Trump from the American political stage.

These are the people and institutions that doubled down on American warmongering, allowing themselves to be sucked into a Ukraine trap that was designed to destroy Russia for America's exclusive benefit, destroying Europe in the process.

The Europeans, ever the compliant minions, were too blinded by their willingness to serve to see that they were as much the sacrificial lambs as was Ukraine.

And, when it looked as if Trump was going to emerge victorious, it was the Europeans — in NATO and the EU — who conspired with the Biden administration to “Trump proof” policies in hopes that they could, once again, simply ride out four years of Trumpism while the U.S. establishment contained and undermined Trump from within.

But Trump had learned his lesson.

The revolution began on Day One by destroying the establishment Europe was counting on to contain Trump.

The Department of Justice, which had been so effectively weaponized during Trump's first term and employed to destroy Trump in the intervening four years, has been castrated.

The intelligence community, which the senior Democratic senator, Chuck Schumer, once bragged had “six ways from Sunday” to destroy Trump, has been turned over to Tulsi Gabbard, who will bring it to heel.

The American foreign policy establishment has been exposed as a giant money laundering scheme focused more on regime change than foreign aid.

And the U.S. Congress is implicated in all of this.

Trump decapitated the very establishment Europe was counting on to contain him.

This is what happens in revolutions.

And then Trump turned his attention to Europe.

Keep in mind that in the world of Donald Trump, the Europeans — especially their twin institutions, NATO and the EU — are not allies, but enemies.

Trump's new secretary of defense, Pete Hegseth, travelled to NATO and put Europe on notice that it was not business as usual, and that perceptions Europe had about key issues such as the war in Ukraine were, in fact, misperceptions.



Hegseth, center, arriving at NATO headquarters in Brussels on Feb 12. (DoD, Alexander C. Kubitza)

No NATO for Ukraine.

No return to the 1991 borders with Russia.

No American troops in Ukraine.

No NATO cover for any European “peacekeeping” force that might be deployed to Ukraine.

And Europe was paying for everything going forward.

Enter the OODA-loop.

Hegseth was the initiating action.

Europe scrambled to react.

Enter Vice President J.D. Vance.



Vance addressing the Munich Security Conference on Feb. 14. (Courtesy MSC/Marc Conzelmann/)

His speech at the MSC was not designed as a piece of rhetorical genius that would go down in history for its eloquence and intellectual concepts.

It was a turd in the European punchbowl, a deliberately provocative punch in the face of political norms designed to inject chaos into the sense of order that Europe thrives on.

Even as Europe strove to respond to the provocation of Hegseth, it now had to adjust to the frontal assault on its sensibilities that J.D. Vance had unleashed.

The OODA-loop was in full operational mode.

Whatever the Europeans thought the MSC was going to be — perhaps the forum for a forceful rejoinder to the insults of Pete Hegseth — fell apart as they scrambled to respond to the new insults laid out by J.D. Vance, who openly questioned Europe's role as a partner of the United States.

For the European elites gathered in Munich, who had spent their entire adult existence perfecting their roles — individually and collectively — as America's compliant servants, to suddenly be told they were bad girls and boys whom America no longer identified with was too much.

Munich may be remembered by J.D. Vance's unorthodox — indeed, revolutionary — presentation.

But the Munich experience is best encapsulated by the sight and sound of Christopher Heusgen, the chairman of the MSC, breaking down in tears as he closed the MSC, overcome by

the reality that Europe was never more than a tool of American power, and now there is a different American master who has decided that Europe is no longer useful as a tool.

In the aftermath of Munich, Europe is scrambling to respond to the new reality manifested during the MSC.

Action-reaction.

The OODA-loop.

As French President Emmanuel Macron rallies his European allies to cobble together a coherent response to Trump's Ukrainian apostasy, Trump dispatched a high-level negotiation team, led by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, to Saudi Arabia, where they will meet with a similarly high-level team from Russia, led by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, to negotiate an end to the Ukraine conflict and a revival of U.S.-Russian relations that will spell the end of NATO and EU relevancy.

Neither the EU nor Ukraine was invited to the table.

Game. Set. Match.

How do I explain Munich?

It is the revolutionary application of Boyd's OODA-loop, a masterful case-study in disruptive politics conducted in an atmosphere of chaos brought about by the disembowelment of deep-seated political establishments the world relied upon for stability.

It's an acid trip down the rabbit hole chasing a White Rabbit that won't stop to explain what's happening.

It's a magic carpet ride to the unknown, piloted by a man who long ago stopped caring about the things we all had grown accustomed to believing served as the core aspects of the lives we led.

It is the opening salvo of revolutionary change experienced by people who do not understand revolutions and are not prepared for one to break out all around them.

It's beautiful in a horrible way.

It's Donald Trump personified.

"Do you know that the man really likes you?" the unnamed photojournalist tells the unbelieving everyman, Captain Willard, in the final apocalyptic scenes of *Apocalypse Now*.

"He likes you. He really likes you. But he's got something in mind for you. Aren't you curious about that? I'm curious. I'm very curious. Are you curious? There's something happening out here, man. You know something, man? I know something you that you don't know. That's right, Jack. The man is clear in his mind, but his soul is mad. Oh, yeah.

He's dying, I think. He hates all this. He hates it! But the man's a – he reads poetry out loud, all right? And a voice – he likes you 'cause you're still alive. He's got plans for you. No, no. I'm not gonna help you. You're gonna help him, man. You're gonna help him. I mean, what are they gonna say when he's gone? 'Cause he dies when it dies, when it dies, he dies! What are they gonna say about *him*?"

Welcome to the Revolution.

Scott Ritter is a former U.S. Marine Corps intelligence officer who served in the former Soviet Union implementing arms control treaties, in the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm and in Iraq overseeing the disarmament of WMD. His most recent book is [*Disarmament in the Time of Perestroika*](#), published by Clarity Press.