

# The New York Times covers for US role in Georgia crisis

By Alex Lantier and Barry Grey  
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In its recent coverage, the *New York Times* has repeatedly asserted that US officials, in the lead-up to Georgia's August 7 attack on South Ossetia, tried to prevent Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili from embarking on a military confrontation with Russia and were taken by surprise by the outbreak of hostilities.

The *Times* published a pair of articles—"After Mixed US Messages, a War Erupted in Georgia" (August 13) and "Rejuvenated Georgian President Cites US Ties as a 'Turning Point' in Conflict" (August 14)—promoting claims by State Department officials that Saakashvili acted independently and against the advice of the US.

On August 13, the *Times* wrote: "During a private dinner on July 9, Ms. Rice's aides say, she warned President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia not to get into a military conflict with Russia that Georgia could not win. 'She told him, in no uncertain terms, that he had to put a non-use of force pledge on the table,' according to a senior administration official who accompanied Ms. Rice to the Georgian capital."

The *Times* quoted an American officer involved in US-Georgian military training programs as saying the Georgian attack on South Ossetia "caught us totally by surprise."

At the same time, the article acknowledged the provocative tone adopted by Rice during her visit to Tbilisi. "Publicly, Ms. Rice struck a different tone," the *Times* noted, "one of defiant support for Georgia in the face of Russian pressure."

At a joint press conference with Rice, Saakashvili underscored the unqualified support given by Rice to his demand for the reassertion of Georgian control over the pro-Russian breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He said, "We are also very grateful for your support for our peace plan for the conflicts and for your unwavering support for Georgia's territorial

integrity."

The claim that Saakashvili acted without the foreknowledge and approval of the US is simply not believable. No one could doubt that Russia, which had peacekeepers stationed in South Ossetia, would respond strongly to a Georgian attack on the region. It is inconceivable that the regime in Tbilisi would take such a momentous action on its own.

The Georgian government is completely dependent on Washington—politically, economically and militarily. It is a creature of Washington, having to come to power in the US-engineered "Rose Revolution" in late 2003.

Preparations would have been well advanced for the August 7 attack on South Ossetia when Rice was in Tbilisi only a month before. The Georgian military is virtually run by the US, having been revamped top to bottom by American military advisers and rebuilt with hundreds of millions of dollars in US military aid. Rice's trip, moreover, was followed by a three-week training mission at a military base outside of Tbilisi involving 1,000 US soldiers.

The US has built up the Georgian regime as its major ally in the Caucasus as part of its long-standing drive to supplant Russia in Moscow's former spheres of influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Georgia is of particular strategic importance because it is a transit country for several oil and natural gas pipelines—most prominently, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline running from the oil-rich Caspian Basin to the Mediterranean. The construction of the BTC pipeline was a central focus of US foreign policy under both the Clinton and Bush administrations, precisely because it bypasses Russian territory.

The *Times* makes no attempt to explore the implications of the version of events it is promoting.

Even if one were to accept the official line of the State Department, it would not diminish the culpability of the United States in the war that erupted between its client state and Russia.

If Saakashvili simply ignored the injunctions of his American sponsors, and independently launched a military adventure certain to further poison US-Russian relations and even bring the two nuclear powers to the point of a military confrontation, then the question must be asked: Why has the US backed such a reckless and irresponsible regime, and why is it redoubling its support going forward?

Moreover, if the official story is true, then the attempt of the US to attribute the entire crisis to Russian aggression and expansionism collapses. It does not imply any support for the reactionary nationalist Putin regime and its actions to acknowledge that the existence of a wildly provocative “loose cannon” regime on its southern border would be bound to have some bearing on its policy in the region.

What, moreover, does the official account, backed up by the *Times*, reveal about the nature of the Georgian regime? Again, the *Times* maintains a cynical silence, but the implications are clear.

The Saakashvili government is a regime of immense crisis, resting on the narrowest of social foundations and based on virulent Georgian nationalism. The picture of a government that cannot be held back from lashing out militarily does not conform, needless to say, with the image of “democratic Georgia” so assiduously promoted by the US government and media.

In fact, there is nothing democratic about the Saakashvili government. It is a right-wing regime that rests on a faction of the post-Soviet oligarchy that enriched itself by plundering the formerly nationalized economy. It has promoted a tiny wealthy elite on the basis of “free market” policies, while the broad mass of the Georgian people have slipped ever more deeply into poverty.

Its methods are authoritarian. Saakashvili himself was reelected in January 2008 in snap elections which he called after putting down mass protests the previous November and declaring martial law.

The *Times*’ potted account of the background to the Georgian-Russian conflict is part and parcel of its effort to whitewash the incendiary role of American

imperialism in the region and conceal the predatory aims that underlie US policy toward Russia. The major organ of the liberal establishment, allied politically to the Democratic Party, is doing its part to deceive and confuse public opinion and legitimize the mad drive of the American ruling elite for hegemony over the Eurasian continent.

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