

Putin:
From Soulmate to Archenemy
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EVER SINCE George W. Bush looked into Vladimir Putin's eyes and "was able to get a sense of his soul," the story of their meeting in Slovenia in 2001 has been invoked as a lesson about the need for innocent Americans to awaken to the innate devilry of Russia's leader. In 2008, Democratic presidential aspirant Hillary Clinton declared that she could have told Bush that Putin didn't have a soul because he "was a KGB agent. By definition he doesn't have a soul." Three years later, according to then Vice President Joe Biden, he stood inches from Putin's face in Moscow and told him: "I'm looking into your eyes, and I don't think you have a soul." To people as different as the politician John McCain and the Penn professor Benjamin Nathans, all one needs to know about Putin is contained in three letters: K-G-B. According to a sensational video by the actor Morgan Freeman and the director Rob Reiner, Putin, a "true KGB spy," was so "angry at the collapse of his communist motherland" in 1991 that he has plotted relentlessly since then to take revenge on America and restore the Soviet empire. The overwhelming consensus about American-Russian tensions has been tersely summarized by the Stanford political scientist Kathryn Stoner: the problem is "a Putin problem."

Blaming the dangerous deterioration of Russian-American relations on the soulless character of Vladimir Putin is simplistic, misleading, and ahistorical. It obscures rather than reveals the main sources of American-Russian conflict. Characterizations of Putin as once and forever a KGB agent with a paranoid Cold War mentality and inveterate hostility to the West disregard dramatic changes in his policies as well as the ups and downs in American-Russian relations since he first became Russia's president in 2000. Depictions of Putin that show him locked into a confrontational course by his desperate need

for foreign enemies to overcome domestic political challenges ignore his repeated overtures to US leaders for better relations and his persistently high approval ratings in Russia. Portraits of Putin as a fanatical Eurasian revanchist are belied by the fact that his perceptions of Russian national interests are in the main stream of Russian nationalism. It is true that Putin has not been saintly in his treatment of prominent Russian opponents or his relations with some neighboring countries. Yet understanding the drastic degeneration of American-Russian relations requires a focus not on Putin's allegedly nefarious nature but on how conflicts have been provoked by unwise decisions by both nations, how tensions have been exacerbated by political theatrics, and how opportunities for cooperation have been obstructed by relentless media demonization.



By August 1991, when hard-line Communists attempted a putsch to try to prevent the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Putin had ended his mundane fifteen-year career as a low-level KGB officer and become an aide to his former law professor, Anatoly Sobchak, the reformist mayor of Leningrad. Instead of supporting the putsch, Putin sided with Sobchak and organized the defense of his offices against a feared assault by Soviet special forces. In the following years, Putin served as deputy mayor of the city (renamed Saint Petersburg) and focused on foreign economic contacts. American business executives and citizen exchange activists who met him in the early 1990s found him unusually hardworking, efficient, and reliable (not an ultranationalist dreaming of revenge on the United States or pining for the restoration of the Soviet Union). After Sobchak narrowly lost his bid for reelection in 1996, Putin moved to Moscow, took a position in the Kremlin's property-management department, and then transferred to the staff of President Boris Yeltsin (whom President Bill Clinton continued to back as the key to preventing a Russian relapse to communism). Valuing Putin's loyalty, Yeltsin made him head of the Federal Security Service (FSB) in 1998, prime minister in 1999, and finally his successor at the start of the new century. As president, Putin did not

quickly start reassembling the Soviet empire. Instead, one of his first moves was to close former Soviet bases overseas, including a listening post in Cuba.

When terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 11 September 2001, Putin immediately called the White House to express his sympathy and offer Russia's full support. As the United States waged war in Afghanistan to eliminate the bases of the terrorists and overthrow the Taliban regime that had hosted them, Russia provided extensive assistance with intelligence and logistics. Overriding resistance from the Russian military, Putin opened Russian airspace to US military transport planes, urged leaders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to allow the United States to establish bases in their countries along the route to Afghanistan, and directed veterans of the Soviet war in Afghanistan to share lessons from their experiences with US officers. In addition, Russia played a vital role in supporting American diplomats in the formation of a post-Taliban government for Afghanistan.

In November 2001, at the height of American-Russian cooperation in Afghanistan, President Bush invited his friend Putin to his ranch in Texas. "We are seeing a historic change in [the] relationship between Russia and the United States," Bush declared in a toast. Russia was not an enemy but "a strong partner in the fight against terrorism." That was not a reflection of naïveté but a realistic statement that matched Putin's own views and goals. Hoping to broaden the budding partnership, the two presidents issued a joint statement on the building of a new Russian-American economic relationship that would center on cooperation in the extraction and export of the vast energy resources of the former Soviet Union.

Yet American enthusiasts for the prospects for a major expansion of trade and investment sometimes neglected differences between American and Russian understandings of the appropriate relationship between government and business. In June 2002, for example, US Ambassador to Moscow Alexander Vershbow expressed his expectation that in return for access to American markets and investment

Russia would “divorce politics from commerce.” However, Putin believed strongly that for Russia to recover from the weakness and confusion of the 1990s, it was vital to increase the Kremlin’s role in managing the development and use of Russian resources. That did not mean there was an irreconcilable difference between Russian mercantilism and American free-market economics: in reality, the Kremlin took less control of Russian oil resources than the governments of most oil exporting countries did, while the US government and giant corporations often worked closely together. But diverging ideas about the proper roles of governments and businesses did contribute to increasing friction, as Steve Coll has shown in *Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power* (2012). Putin, who had made a point of instructing Russian oligarchs to stay out of politics, was in no mood, for example, to be lectured by the arrogant head of ExxonMobil about arrangements for a purchase of the Russian oil company Yukos.

Tensions culminated in a sensational clash between Putin and the head of Yukos, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, that would have a deep impact on Russian-American relations. In the 1990s Khodorkovsky had used close ties to Kremlin officials to gain control of state assets for a fraction of their value; he had also used shady practices to cheat shareholders, including a major American investor. However, in the first years of the twenty-first century, Khodorkovsky sought to present Yukos as a model of a modern, Western-style corporation. Thinking that close ties to America would protect him from the Kremlin, Khodorkovsky repeatedly visited the United States, met with key US officials (including Vice President Dick Cheney), made large donations to think tanks, and gave speeches about Russia’s need to choose democracy instead of authoritarianism. As Richard Sakwa has detailed in *Putin and the Oligarch* (2014), Khodorkovsky then defied Putin by supporting the US invasion of Iraq in March 2003, negotiated directly with China about the construction of a pipeline, used money to line up many supporters in the Russian parliament (Duma), and proceeded with plans to sell a large stake in Yukos to ExxonMobil even after Putin told him he disapproved of the sale. Finally, late in October 2003, masked

agents of the FSB stormed onto Khodorkovsky's plane in Siberia and arrested him. Convicted on charges of fraud, tax evasion, and embezzlement, Khodorkovsky was imprisoned until 2013.

Many American politicians, journalists, and scholars denounced the prosecution of Khodorkovsky as a travesty of justice and a setback to the cause of democracy. Thus, a complex case, in which Putin had hesitated while Khodorkovsky repeatedly and provocatively challenged the president's authority, became a simple morality play with the oligarch as hero and Putin as a tyrannical villain. While Russia did not go as far as Saudi Arabia, Brazil, or Norway in state control of energy resources, Russia was stigmatized for rolling back privatization—a stigma that worsened as Putin's aides brazenly dismembered and swallowed Yukos.

After 2003, American-Russian economic relations did not develop as Putin and Bush had hoped. Although Russian export of oil to the United States increased, American investment in Russia's energy sector did not. With the price of oil rising dramatically on world markets, Russia had less need for foreign capital. One major consequence of the limited development of Russian-American economic relations was that it inhibited the emergence of strong lobbies for dialogue and cooperation between the two countries when conflicts erupted in other areas.



The most important cause of the slide from partnership to hostility was increasing geopolitical rivalry on the periphery of Russia. While America and Russia had clashed over Manchuria in the first years of the twentieth century and over Eastern Europe in the mid-twentieth, in the twenty-first century they clashed over the southern and southwestern edges of Russia, from Chechnya and Georgia to Ukraine.

From the outset of Putin's leadership, he faced a challenge in the Caucasus. In August 1999, just before Yeltsin named Putin prime minister, a radical Chechen warlord led a raid into Dagestan that he hoped would ignite war against Russia throughout the northern Caucasus region and lead to the creation of a Muslim state between the Caspian and Black Seas. Fearing that Islamist rebellion in the Caucasus could



Vladimir Putin by David Levine.

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spark the disintegration of the multinational Russian Federation, Putin resolved to crush the “bandits.” Relying heavily on air power to reduce Russian casualties, Russia gained control of much of Chechnya in the fall, captured the flattened capital Grozny in February 2000, and then waged a protracted war against Chechen guerrillas who retreated into the southern mountains.

While Bill Clinton had condoned Yeltsin’s brutal, unsuccessful war on Chechnya in the mid-1990s as comparable to Abraham Lincoln’s effort to preserve the Union, the Clinton administration

condemned Russia's new war and urged Putin to negotiate a settlement with Chechen leaders (advice Putin disregarded). When Chechen terrorists seized a theater in Moscow in October 2002 and a school in southern Russia in May 2004, George W. Bush emphatically blamed the terrorists for the sieges, which led to the deaths of hundreds of adults and children. Yet, strikingly, many American journalists, intellectuals, and politicians focused their criticism on Russia's botched termination of the sieges and expressed sympathy with Chechen rebels. During the US war in Iraq, journalists and neoconservative intellectuals blamed US soldiers' killing and torture of Iraqi civilians on mistakes and "bad apples," but they attributed Russian brutality to the fundamental ethos of its military and the callousness of its top political leaders. Thus, instead of strengthening American-Russian solidarity in a global struggle against Islamist terrorism, the war in Chechnya led to the blackening of American public images of Russia and Putin.

As Russia struggled to pacify Chechnya, a new point of friction with America developed to the south, in Georgia. Widespread fraud in a November 2003 parliamentary election sparked peaceful demonstrations that led to the resignation of the president, former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, and the election of thirty-six-year-old Mikheil Saakashvili, who had earned a law degree at Columbia University. Although the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the financier George Soros's Open Society Institute financially assisted the "Rose Revolution," the Georgian protests did not provoke immediate opposition from Russia. Instead, Moscow facilitated the return to Georgia of the breakaway region of Adjara and the exile of its corrupt ruler.

While ethnic Georgians predominated in Adjara, Ossetians and Abkhazians made up the majorities of the population in two other provinces that had fought bloody wars of independence against Georgia in the early 1990s. From the beginning of his presidency, Saakashvili vowed to recover the "lost territories." Thus, while American politicians and journalists lionized Saakashvili as a heroic democrat, he had imperial ambitions.

Georgian territorial claims triggered conflict with Russia, which had placed peacekeepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and had promised to protect their autonomy. Although President Bush privately cautioned Saakashvili against military adventurism, he also pushed NATO to pledge in April 2008 that Georgia would become a member of NATO, which Russia opposed. As Gerard Toal has suggested in *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (2017), the impulsive Saakashvili also may have been emboldened by top US officials' public statements of general support for Georgia, by the fact that two thousand US troops participated in a military exercise with Georgian forces in the summer of 2008, and by the presence of one hundred thirty US military advisers in the Georgian Ministry of Defense.

On 7 August 2008, after artillery and mortar exchanges between Ossetian and Georgian forces, Saakashvili ordered an invasion of South Ossetia. Georgian rockets killed Russian peacekeepers, Georgian tanks rolled into the capital, Tskhinvali, and Georgian fighters shot hundreds of Ossetians. Early on 8 August, Russian soldiers counterattacked and soon drove Georgian troops out of South Ossetia. Dreaming of hanging Saakashvili "by the balls," Putin authorized Russian forces to drive toward Tbilisi. He reconsidered when French leader Nicolas Sarkozy argued against attempting regime change as Bush had in Iraq. Bush's advisors seriously contemplated military intervention, including providing Stinger antiaircraft missiles to Georgia and bombing a tunnel between Russia and South Ossetia. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed and conflict between US and Russian forces was averted.

Although Saakashvili started the war, American media overwhelmingly depicted it as a case of blatant Russian aggression. Editors and cartoonists compared it to the invasions of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan, while columnists likened Putin to Hitler. Ignoring the local origins of the war in a long-term conflict between Ossetians and Georgia, American commentators depicted it as a confrontation between Russia and the West, between barbarism and civilization, between evil and good. Putin, the *New York*

Times declared in a typical editorial, was “the dark hand behind Russia’s aggression.” Saakashvili cleverly had established the foundations for this misrepresentation since 2004 by investing in lobbying in Washington that promoted the notion that Georgia was “one of us.” After launching the attack on South Ossetia, he had easy access to American television and newspapers, where he gave interviews and published columns that distorted the conflict and claimed it was about “American values.”

The short, five-day war had a lasting and poisonous impact on Russian-American relations. In the United States, former Clinton administration officials promoted the idea that the real cause of the war had been imperialist Russia’s drive to obstruct Georgia’s laudable desire to join NATO. Even after a report by the Council of the European Union unambiguously pinned responsibility for starting the war on Georgia, journalists habitually referred to it simply as a “Russian invasion.” In Russia, the overwhelming majority of the public, including many pro-Western liberals, denounced Georgian aggression, while a significant minority blamed the United States for the war. Like Putin, many Russians also felt disgusted by how US officials and journalists could melodramatically misrepresent the clash.

While Georgia was a small nation that did relatively little trade with Russia, Ukraine was much larger, had roughly ten times as many people, and had deep economic connections to Russia. Ukraine became an American-Russian battleground when the 2004 presidential campaign there pitted Viktor Yanukovych, whose base of support was in the southeastern region most closely intertwined with Russia, against Viktor Yushchenko, who was married to a former US State Department official. Russia provided substantial financial support to the Yanukovych campaign, and Putin made public appearances on behalf of Yanukovych (though he did not like him personally). In November 2004, Yanukovych reportedly garnered 49 percent of the votes while Yushchenko received 46 percent. Outraged by news of ballot stuffing and multiple voting, two hundred thousand protesters in Kiev—including many young activists who had received American-sponsored training—demanded a new election. When Yushchenko then defeated Yanukovych by a margin of 8 percent, American

politicians and journalists hailed a triumph for American principles and influence.

Yet the aftermath of the “Orange Revolution” proved disappointing to its American supporters. While Yushchenko hoped to bring Ukraine into NATO, the majority of Ukrainians opposed joining that military alliance. Under the increasingly unpopular Yushchenko, Ukraine’s weak economy continued to be plagued by corruption. After Yanukovych’s party won a plurality of the vote in fair elections in 2006, he returned to being prime minister, and then in 2010 he was elected president.

Putin and others in Moscow worried that the Western-supported revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were rehearsals for a regime change in Russia itself. In 2006 Putin asserted that “foreign secret services” were financing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Russia and imposed new restrictions on them. Western writers often asserted that such measures stemmed from Putin’s peculiar personal “paranoia” about subversion. Yet American journalists had often depicted foreign leaders as paranoid or otherwise insane before the United States tried to overthrow them (Mossadeq in Iran, Arbenz in Guatemala, Sukarno in Indonesia, Lumumba in the Congo, Castro in Cuba, etc.). Moreover, Putin’s distaste for revolution was shared by the majority of Russians, who valued the stability of his presidency and did not want to risk returning to the turmoil of the 1990s.

Fears that Americans hoped to promote a revolution in Russia were not entirely unfounded. One of the most prominent critics of Putin, the political scientist Michael McFaul, persistently focused on supporting liberal dissenters in Russia and completing a revolution left unfinished in the 1990s. Such ideas were welcomed by Vice President Cheney. In May 2006 Cheney flew to Lithuania to give a major speech to leaders of Baltic states that had recently joined NATO and leaders of Black Sea countries that aspired to membership in NATO. Hailing the “brave leaders of color revolutions,” Cheney forecast that what had happened in Tbilisi and Kiev would occur also in Moscow.

In the wake of the “color revolutions,” Putin seemed to US leaders to become a different man from the partner against terrorism they had met in 2001. In July 2006 Bush confided to the prime minister of

Slovenia: “I think Putin is not a democrat anymore. He’s a tsar. I think we’ve lost him.” The notion that Putin had become an all-powerful tsar exaggerated his control of a fractious oligarchic system and disregarded his authentic, widespread, and persistent popularity in Russia (with approval ratings ranging between 60 and 80 percent). Yet the misleading label would continue to be applied by Americans who sought to deny Putin any democratic legitimacy.

In reality, Bush had changed more than Putin had. In the 2000 presidential campaign Bush had declared that “the only people who are going to reform Russia are Russians,” yet in 2006 he approved Cheney’s crusading speech on the edge of Russia. Bush does not seem to have realized how his administration’s policies, especially the war in Iraq, overt and covert support for color revolutions, and the eastward expansion of NATO, antagonized Putin and pushed him toward a more heavy-handed management of Russian domestic politics.



The Democrat Barack Obama, who observed the drastic deterioration of relations with Russia during his successful presidential campaign in 2008, decided to pursue a fresh start by downplaying ideology and focusing on pragmatic cooperation. The “reset” policy achieved important results from 2009 to 2011. Obama worked closely with Dmitry Medvedev, a young, liberal-sounding lawyer who became president in May 2008 when Putin shifted to being prime minister. Through fourteen meetings and phone calls, Obama and Medvedev agreed on the terms of a new strategic arms reduction treaty (New START), signed in April 2010. Following a separate Obama-Medvedev agreement in July 2009, Russia allowed NATO to expand its shipments of supplies across Russian territory to forces fighting Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan. After these achievements in strategic cooperation, the main area of future opportunity that Obama and Vice President Biden saw was increasing commerce. With US assistance, Russia joined the World Trade Organization in December 2011, an important step toward the expanded economic relationship Bush and Putin had envisioned but not achieved.

Yet even as the reset seemed to be fulfilling its promise, US engagement with Russia faltered. Once the New START treaty had been signed, Obama withdrew from close involvement in relations with Russia. Some of the officials who then played more prominent roles had histories of tensions with the Kremlin. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who had proclaimed in 2008 that Putin did not have a soul, outraged him by charging that the Russian parliamentary election of December 2011 had been rigged. When the election fraud triggered massive protests in Moscow, Putin accused Clinton of sending a signal that instigated the demonstrations. Michael McFaul, who became US Ambassador to Moscow at the start of 2012, immediately angered the Kremlin by meeting with liberal Russian critics of Putin and vigorously expressing moral support for them. Such American words and gestures made it easier for the Kremlin to depict the anti-Putin activists in Russia as pro-American subversives. Putin's denunciations of alleged American meddling helped him to win reelection in 2012 by mobilizing working-class Russians outside the largest cities. After the election the Kremlin clamped down harder on NGOs and drove American democracy-promotion organizations (the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute) out of the country.

US officials' inflated idea of their ability to influence Russian politics contributed to the rising friction. Obama and his top advisors had hoped that they could build up the diminutive Medvedev's authority at the expense of Putin, whom they distrusted and disliked. In 2010, when an FBI plan to arrest Russian spies in America threatened to create a flap that would damage relations with Moscow, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates suggested that the administration should avoid embarrassing Medvedev by arresting the spies while he was visiting the United States and instead try "to flip this on Putin." In 2011 Biden implicitly urged Moscow State University students to challenge the Kremlin and informed prominent Russian opponents of Putin that he thought Putin should not run for a new term as president in 2012. Biden's brash remarks, Gates's unexecuted scheme, and Obama's condescending scorn for Putin reflected a serious misreading of the

situation: Medvedev lacked an independent base of power, and Putin remained the dominant figure in Moscow.

Even more than Biden and Obama, key members of Congress exaggerated Washington's potential to alter Russian conduct. In December 2012 Congress imposed travel bans and sanctions on Russian officials who had been involved in the prosecution, beating, and death of Sergei Magnitsky, a tax lawyer who had exposed schemes to steal assets of the most important American investor in Russia, Bill Browder. After Magnitsky's death in 2009, Browder launched a determined campaign to bring Magnitsky's killers to justice through publicity and lobbying Congress. Prodded by Browder, Senator Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), an ardent crusader for human rights in Russia, introduced the Magnitsky Act in 2010 and pushed for its approval in spite of opposition from the Obama administration. Although Browder knew Russian oligarchs and political leaders, including Putin, tended to show no weakness and to escalate confrontations, he somehow expected the visa restrictions and sanctions imposed by the Act to "send shock waves through the Russian elite" and "destroy the equilibrium of the Russian authorities." The Magnitsky Act succeeded in angering Putin, but instead of backing down he became more defiant. Accused officers received awards instead of punishment, and the Kremlin retaliated against the Magnitsky Act by imposing a ban on American adoptions of Russian children.

Although Congress, the White House, and the American press lacked the ability to alter Russia's political course in a positive way, they could demonstrate their sympathy with Russians who seemed to embody American values. The most sensational opportunity for that appeared in 2012, when members of the feminist group Pussy Riot entered the most important cathedral in Moscow, pulled colorful balaclavas over their faces, and shouted a profanity-laced "punk prayer" for the Mother of God to "chase Putin out." The vulgar antics of Pussy Riot offended the majority of Russians who considered themselves Orthodox even if they did not attend church services. The feminists' stunt also appalled many political opponents of Putin who thought the tasteless provocation would benefit the Kremlin and mobilize its conservative supporters. Yet when three members of Pussy Riot were

sentenced to two years in prison they became martyrs for the cause of freedom in the eyes of many Americans. In 2014, the *New York Times* declared that Pussy Riot offered Russia “a much better future” than Putin did with his “soul-crushing repression.” Around the same time, the Obama administration demonstrated its sense of American moral superiority and its scorn for a Russian law that banned homosexual propaganda among minors by sending famous gay and lesbian athletes in a delegation to the Olympics in Sochi. Thus, although Obama initially had distanced himself from Bush’s “Freedom Agenda,” his administration’s rhetoric and gestures toward Russia became increasingly moralistic and ideological as relations became more fraught with tension.

Even more important in the deterioration of relations were a series of international developments, including US deployment of missile defense systems (MDS) on the borders of the former Soviet Union and American attempts at regime change in Libya and Syria. When the Bush administration first informed Putin of its intention to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in December 2001, Putin called the decision “a big mistake” for good reason: it shook the foundations of strategic stability between the two nuclear powers. Although Putin then set the issue aside in order to focus on development of a partnership with the United States, he grew more troubled as the Bush administration moved forward with plans to place missile-defense interceptors in Poland and a related radar installation in the Czech Republic in 2006 and 2007. Russian military officials worried that in the future the United States might give the system additional capabilities that would compromise Russia’s deterrence of nuclear attacks, but the Bush administration brushed aside their concerns. After tensions with the Obama administration rose, Russian officials’ tone changed: in November 2011 Putin called the erection of the MDS “a danger to Russia,” and Medvedev threatened to deploy short-range Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad, next to Poland. When the United States finally deployed a MDS in Romania in 2016, Russian officials denounced it as a violation of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty because it also could be used for launching offensive cruise missiles. As the MIT physicist Theodore Postol

and other nuclear weapons experts explained, Russian concerns that the MDS could be used to defend against Russian retaliation for an American nuclear first strike were valid, but they were dismissed by US officials.

In the case of Libya, tacit cooperation soured into a sharp sense of betrayal among Russians. After being lobbied by Biden, Medvedev in March 2011 allowed a United Nations resolution authorizing the use of force to prevent dictator Muammar Gadhafi from suppressing rebels in eastern Libya. As the US, British, and French bombing of Libya went far beyond humanitarian protection of the rebels to assisting their bloody overthrow of Gadhafi, Putin and most of the Russian foreign policy establishment increasingly felt that a naive Medvedev had been deceived into acquiescing in another American regime-change campaign—a view Hillary Clinton’s statements tended to confirm.

Around the same time as the Libya campaign, Obama called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step aside and approved modest aid to some of the groups fighting against his government. Since Syria had long been an ally of Russia, which maintained an important naval base at Tartus, this marked yet another challenge to Russian interests. In September 2013, after reports that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons (which Obama earlier had said would be crossing a red line), Obama came to the verge of ordering air strikes against Syria. Yet Putin persuaded him instead to pursue a plan for the removal and destruction of Syria’s chemical weapons.

As that largely successful effort indicated, US-Russian cooperation remained possible. In a surprise to Obama, Russia also played a helpful role in a long, multilateral drive to halt Iran’s nuclear program. By approving tougher economic sanctions and delaying a shipment of anti-aircraft missiles, Russia contributed significantly to the reaching of a deal with Iran in 2015. Moreover, Russia showed serious, sustained interest in working with the United States for joint action against al-Qaeda and Islamic State terrorist groups in Syria.

Yet the overall trajectory of Russian-American relations was a downward spiral after Putin returned to the Russian presidency in 2012. In 2013, Edward Snowden, a contractor for the National Security

Agency, released to the press thousands of classified documents that showed pervasive US spying around the world. While seeking asylum elsewhere, Snowden took a flight to Moscow but found that he could not travel farther because the United States had revoked his passport. When Russia granted Snowden temporary asylum, an embarrassed and angry Obama canceled plans to meet with Putin at a G20 summit in St. Petersburg.

A few months later a dangerous confrontation developed in Ukraine. In November 2013, Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych triggered a political crisis by deciding not to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union that would have compelled Ukrainians to undergo a potentially devastating austerity program. Instead, he accepted a large loan and a deep discount on gas from Russia, which hoped to pull Ukraine into a Eurasian Economic Union but also urged that Ukraine not be forced to make a stark choice between East and West. Protesters who wanted Ukraine to be integrated into modern, prosperous Europe became radicalized as Yanukovych's security forces brutally tried to disperse demonstrations. US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, wife of the neo-conservative champion of regime change Robert Kagan, focused on ensuring that a power-sharing agreement would lead to the installation of a pro-Western technocrat in whom she had confidence. In early February 2014 a recording of an expletive-punctuated conversation between Nuland and the US ambassador in Kiev, posted on YouTube, seemed to show that the United States was plotting behind the scenes as well as giving moral support to demonstrators. For weeks, protesters hurled Molotov cocktails at truncheon-wielding riot police on the other side of barricades. Then, on 20 February, in what may have been a deliberate provocation by far-right Ukrainian nationalists, snipers fired on both sides, killing scores of protesters and police. With the crowd rejecting political compromise and Yanukovych fearing assassination, the corrupt but democratically elected leader fled.

Faced with the revolution in Kiev, Putin and his top security advisers quickly decided to secure control of Crimea, a strategic peninsula that Khrushchev had given to Ukraine in 1954 but that had a

predominantly Russophone population. The overwhelming majority of Russians had considered Crimea part of Russia ever since Russia seized it in war against the Ottoman empire in the eighteenth century. At the end of February, Russian soldiers in green uniforms without insignia captured the Crimean parliament building and joined other Russian forces in surrounding Ukrainian bases. In March Crimeans voted overwhelmingly to secede from Ukraine (though many of the Tatar minority boycotted the referendum). Two days later Putin signed a treaty for the annexation of Crimea.

Putin and his aides later claimed that he acted quickly because of the imminent threat that neo-Nazi thugs from Kiev would invade Crimea. Western critics asserted that the Russian invasion was a long-planned part of a plan to reconstruct the old Soviet empire. Yet the most plausible explanation is that Putin and his aides hurriedly put into motion an improvised operation primarily because they feared that Russia would lose access to the vital base for its Black Sea Fleet and that if Ukraine were to join NATO, Crimea might even host NATO ships and troops.

In March, a separatist movement that had local roots but was also fired up by alarmist Russian media reports emerged in eastern Ukraine. Although the Kremlin did not have full control over separatist leaders, when Ukrainian forces seemed on the verge of defeating the insurgents in the summer of 2014, Russia escalated its support, which included providing anti-aircraft missiles. In July, at the height of the fighting, a civilian airliner flying from Amsterdam to Malaysia was shot down, killing almost three hundred on board the plane. Without waiting for the results of an investigation, many American journalists blamed Putin personally for the shootdown. After insurgents, with support from Russian “volunteers,” drove Ukrainian forces back in August, they signed a ceasefire in September. Yet artillery shelling and skirmishes along the front lines continued in the following years.

Both Russian and American leaders made false statements about events in Ukraine that widened the divide between their nations’ views. Putin lied when he denied that Russian forces were involved in the seizure of Crimea. His aides exaggerated the real but localized menace from Ukrainian ultranationalist paramilitary groups

and invented some incidents. On the other hand, Secretary of State John Kerry falsely claimed in a speech in Kiev in 2014 that protesters against Yanukovich were “unarmed except with ideas” and that they had stood “peacefully against tyranny.” In reality, photographs and video clearly showed that at the climax of the confrontation some protesters were armed with hunting rifles as well as Molotov cocktails. Like Kerry, Obama in a speech in Estonia in 2014 disregarded the prominent role of neofascist groups in fighting in Kiev, insisted that the protests “were not led by neo-Nazis and fascists,” and denied that they aimed at an armed seizure of power.

The dishonest and misleading rhetoric of politicians, together with media images of evil enemies, spurred sharp increases in Russian and American popular antipathies to the opposing countries. After the conflict over Ukraine in 2014, the percentage of Russians with positive views of America declined to just 18 percent. On the other side, the percentage of Americans who viewed Russia as the greatest enemy of the United States rose from only 2 percent in 2012 to 18 percent in 2015. Thus, Americans ranked Russia as a greater threat than even rocket-rattling North Korea, longtime foe Iran, and rapidly growing China. The shift from valuing Russia as a partner against terrorism to loathing Russia as America’s archenemy was now complete, though the demonization of Russia would become even more intense in the following years.



During and after the US presidential election campaign of 2016, American-Russian tension rose to a frenzied intensity not seen since the confrontations of the early 1980s. The increasing American hostility toward Russia stemmed in part from Russian actions. Yet anti-Russian feeling was greatly inflamed by American politicians and journalists who were determined to depict Russia as not only a rival for influence in Eastern Europe and the Middle East but also as a terrible menace to the United States and the entire world order it created after 1945.

As the United States entered the election year, many politicians, military leaders, intellectuals, and journalists felt deeply frustrated by the inability of the sole superpower to impose its will around the

world. North Korea repeatedly vexed Americans by testing nuclear weapons and vowing to manufacture missiles that could reach the United States. China challenged the American-established world order by establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (a potential competitor to the World Bank), inducing key US allies to join the bank despite American opposition, and creating island bases near vital lines of commerce and communication in the South China Sea. In Afghanistan and Iraq, seizures of territory by the Taliban and the Islamic State dramatized the failure of enormously costly US “nation building” projects. Yet American political and media elites expressed the greatest exasperation at Russia’s surprisingly successful use of air power to attack US-supported “moderate rebels” in Syria—who actually included and collaborated with radical jihadists. By the beginning of 2017, Russian bombing, combined with ground assaults by the Syrian Army, crushed the rebels in Aleppo, where they had refused to distance themselves from their al-Qaeda-linked Islamist allies.

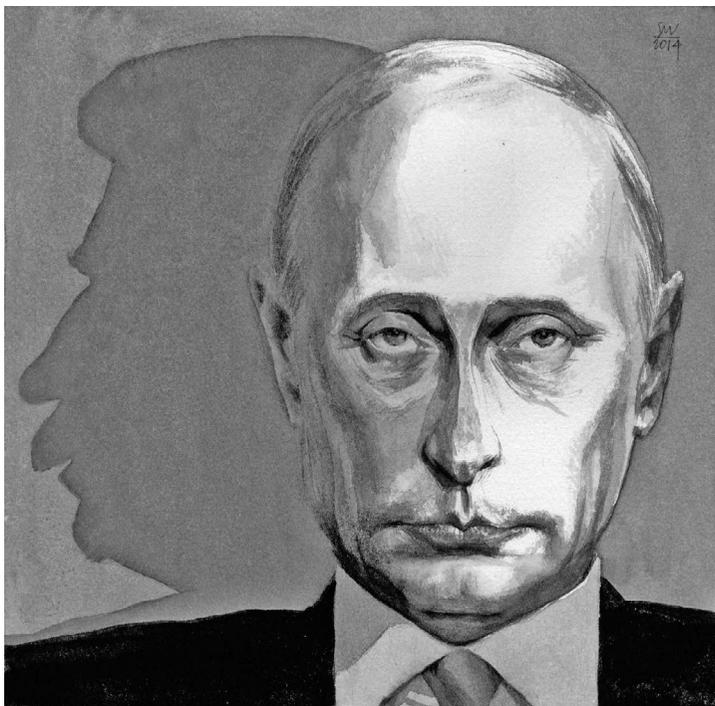
It had been intolerable for American presidents to face defiance from earlier foreign leaders—from Victoriano Huerta to Saddam Hussein. Confrontations with such rulers often led US presidents to feel compelled to smash their foreign foes in order to preserve their political authority. Similar pressure to knock down Putin developed. Obama’s unwillingness to authorize strikes against Putin’s Syrian ally Bashar al-Assad in 2013 had lowered Obama’s standing within the hawkish Washington establishment, which was infuriated again when he declined to order air strikes in 2016. Simmering frustration at Obama’s inaction and America’s seeming impotence while Putin acted decisively and effectively was like dry kindling waiting for a match.

In the middle of the election campaign, in July 2016, a controversy erupted over alleged Russian hacking into the computers of the Democratic National Committee (DNC). Emails released by WikiLeaks showed DNC officials inappropriately sought to aid Hillary Clinton against her Democratic rival Bernie Sanders. Journalists who backed Clinton quickly tried to turn attention from the embarrassing emails to the idea of “a Kremlin conspiracy to aid Donald J. Trump,” the Republican nominee.

Russia continued to figure prominently in the presidential campaign in other ways. Trump and his running mate, Mike Pence, repeatedly asserted that Putin was a stronger leader than Obama, that Putin did not respect either Obama or Clinton, and that Trump would be more effective in dealing with Putin. On the other side, Clinton and her supporters repeatedly called Trump “Putin’s puppet,” insinuating that Trump would do Russia’s bidding at the expense of US interests. But the attacks on Trump did not deter many of his blue-collar and middle-class white supporters from voting for him. More concerned about international terrorism, few Trump supporters viewed Russia as a serious threat. Influenced by Trump’s positive comments about Putin, Republican approval of the Russian leader actually rose to 37 percent during the campaign.

In a stunning surprise, Trump won the electoral-college vote even while losing the popular vote. As liberal journalists overcame their shock, they collaborated with intelligence officials to revive and inflame the old accusations about Russian hacking, often implying that Russian interference had caused Clinton’s defeat. Citing a former CIA executive’s hyperbolic claim that Russian hacks were “the political equivalent of 9/11,” *Time* columnist Joe Klein complained that the media had not sufficiently hyped the story and urged his fellow journalists to apply “relentless” pressure on the issue of the Trump team’s “Russian connection.” They did. Although an official intelligence assessment delivered to President-elect Trump early in January actually presented very little concrete evidence, newspapers gave the report banner headlines on front pages. With the aid of anonymous leaks from intelligence sources, journalists tirelessly promoted suspicions and circulated discredited or completely unverified information, such as that Russia had captured Trump in a pornographic video. Not since the 1979 controversy over the alleged “discovery” of a Soviet “combat brigade” in Cuba torpedoed the prospects for ratification of the SALT II treaty had intelligence leakers and journalists collaborated so vigorously to obstruct cooperation with Russia.

The Russophobic frenzy gained such intensity that normally reasonable people lost their sense of perspective. *New York Times*



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columnist Roger Cohen screamed that to cooperate with a monster like Putin “would be calamitous”; it would lead to the dismemberment of NATO and “endanger the world.” Former counterterrorism coordinator Daniel Benjamin claimed that while America took care to avoid collateral damage, Russia was reckless in its uses of force, and therefore collaborating with Russia would “shred our relationships with Sunni Muslims around the world.” (In reality, Russia was cooperating effectively with Turkey, a predominantly Sunni nation and NATO ally, against Islamic State terrorists in Syria.)

Politicians joined the fray. In one of the most sensational accusations, Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) alleged in January 2017 that Russia’s bombing of Aleppo made Putin “a war criminal.” (No

prominent figure asked whether by that standard US presidents were war criminals because of the US bombing of Iraqi cities and Afghan villages, which caused many times more civilian deaths.)

A more persistent charge, repeatedly made by Senator John McCain and others, was that Putin is “a murderer,” personally responsible for ordering the assassinations of rivals and critics. The foundations for the charges have often been shaky. The deaths of some Russians that Americans initially added to the list of Putin’s victims, such as former government official Mikhail Lesin, were later determined to have been caused by accidents. The killings of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 and the politician Boris Nemtsov in 2015 appear to have been carried out by Chechens without Putin’s approval or knowledge. Although Putin bears indirect responsibility for having appointed the brutal leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, the families of Nemtsov and Politkovskaya have not accused Putin of their killings. A British inquiry presented compelling evidence that ex-KGB officer Andrei Lugovoi poisoned renegade former FSB officer Alexander Litvinenko in 2006, but no evidence to support its conclusion that Putin probably ordered the poisoning. There are reasons to suspect Putin in this case: Litvinenko made flamboyant accusations against Putin (his former FSB boss); Putin has called betrayal unforgivable; and Putin awarded a medal to Lugovoi. Still at this point there is nothing to elevate the charge from plausible to proven.

The most recent sensational accusation involves a former Russian military intelligence officer, Sergei Skripal, who worked as a double agent for British intelligence. Early in March 2018, after Skripal and his daughter Yulia were found unconscious in an English town, British leaders quickly charged that Russia had tried to kill them with a military nerve agent and then led the United States and other nations in mass expulsions of Russian diplomats. A month later many questions remained unanswered. Why would the Kremlin order an assassination on the eve of a prestigious World Cup soccer tournament in Russia that Putin personally promoted? Why did British leaders immediately blame Putin instead of waiting for the completion of a police investigation? In the rush to judgment, few, if any, commentators paused to

consider whether the United States had done comparably appalling things, such as shredding a sixteen-year-old American boy in a drone strike in Yemen weeks after a separate drone strike had killed his father, the US citizen and radical Muslim preacher Anwar al-Awlaki. Consideration of such killings would not have excused the use of a nerve agent in a place where it could harm innocent people, but it might have tempered the self-righteous outrage at a supposed uniquely heinous Russian action.

Even if there had been no Skripal case it seemed that there was nothing Putin could do to moderate the vilification of him. In the fall of 2017 he opened a major memorial in Moscow to the victims of Stalinist terror, but critics scoffed and clung to their conception of him as a Stalin-like tyrant. In major addresses on 1 December 2016 and 1 March 2018, he made overtures for better relations with the United States, yet American journalists and politicians ignored those words and focused instead on his boasts about Russia's development of new weapons systems, which they depicted as new evidence of Russia's threat to the West. On 18 March, more than 70 percent of Russian voters reelected Putin—a result that closely matched polling data—but American commentators seized on a few reports of ballot stuffing to dismiss the election as a sham and retain their images of Putin as a dictator.



The vilification of Russian leaders is not new. Thirty years ago, when anticommunists insisted that the Soviet Union was still an “evil empire” despite Mikhail Gorbachev’s liberalizing reforms, the veteran diplomat and historian George F. Kennan observed: “A large segment of the American population has the need to cultivate the idea of American innocence and virtue—which requires an opposite pole of evil.” As I showed in *The American Mission and the “Evil Empire”* (2007), the roots of the demonization of Russia reach all the way back to the late nineteenth century, when the United States first emerged as a global power.

What is new in the twenty-first century is that—disregarding Kennan’s warning that expanding NATO would be “the beginning of a new cold war”—the United States has pushed the military alliance to the edges of the Russian Federation, encouraged Georgia and Ukraine (but not Russia) to join the alliance, supported anti-Russian leaders in Georgia and Ukraine, and deployed missile defense systems in eastern Europe that Russia reasonably fears could be part of a strategy for a nuclear first strike against Russia. Although US leaders once believed that a weak Russia’s objections could be ignored, Russia has recovered enough strength to defend its vital interests, sometimes in dishonest, clumsy, or violent ways. These developments—not Putin’s allegedly soulless or murderous nature—are the primary causes of the deterioration of American-Russian relations since 2001.

American political and media elites need an “opposite pole of evil” more than ever today because US military interventions around the world have been disastrous, embarrassing failures and because an America plagued by racial hostility, economic inequality, police brutality, school shootings, and political polarization does not appear to be a model to emulate. Focusing on Russian domestic defects or foreign actions can serve for a time to deflect attention from America’s internal troubles and the catastrophic consequences of US policies in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and elsewhere. Yet, as the veteran Soviet foreign correspondent Stanislav Kondrashov recognized when the old Cold War ended, “you can’t fashion your own virtue from someone else’s flaws.”

American journalists, politicians, and intellectuals have shown little inclination to discuss the devastating results of America’s attempts to remake the post-Cold War world or the part America has played in the dangerous degeneration of Russian-American relations. Yet it is vital to address those issues in order to halt the escalation of the already perilously high tensions with Russia and to begin the hard work of making America live up to its own ideals.