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THEY SAID IT

We are one of those nations that somehow are not part of mankind but exist only for the sake of teaching the world some kind of terrible lesson.

Russian philosopher Pyotr Yakovievich Chaadayev, 1794-1856.

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ONCE UPON A TIME IN RUSSIA.

It may not seem like it right now, but the West has been very lucky over the past several centuries to have Russia as a geopolitical rival, and as an occasional enemy. The Russians can be devious, cunning, brutal, murderous, highly aggressive, and lacking in conscience, compassion, and trustworthiness. But as a nation of chess players, they are highly predictable and not prone to foolish acts of suicidal aggression. And more importantly, there is something in their culture that makes them almost pathologically self-destructive. So, like the dragons drawn on the edges of ancient maps marking the limits of the world as then known, Russia has been a constant and useful reminder to Western civilization that danger lurks around its periphery ready to pounce if it senses weakness, which it routinely does.

Two weeks ago, Russia performed this valuable wake-up-call function once again by invading the sovereign state of Georgia, thus reminding the Europeans and the Americans that they might want to start paying attention to the sad state of their joint defensive capabilities and stop fooling themselves about the alleged congeniality of the rat-faced little murderer who runs that country. Anyway, we look at this as a good thing, like being awakened by one's dog barking because the house is on fire.

It also gives us an opportunity to provide a little look-back on Russian history, borrowed in large part from several articles we wrote over the past 20 years. This effort admittedly contains some chronological expediencies that might drive real historians crazy. But we think it might help to explain how Russia came to be the pain-in-the-butt that it is today and what we might expect from it in the future. So here goes.

People were living in the Ukrainian region north of the Black Sea as early as 1200 B.C. They were the Cimmerians. In the rest of the world, the Greeks were fighting the Trojans, Moses was leading the Israelites out of Egypt, and the Phoenicians were becoming the dominant Mediterranean trading power.

Between 1200 B.C. and 862 A.D., when modern Russian history begins, the area was invaded and ruled by a succession of pretty nasty folks, including the Scythians (from Iran), Sarmatians (more Iranians), the Goths (Germans), the Huns (Asians), the Avars (basically Huns), and the Khazars (more Asians).

But, we'll begin our story in 862 A.D., when the Slavs living around the Ukrainian city of Kiev were confronted with a bunch of Vikings. They were called the Varangian Russes and were led by a fellow named Rurik. These Vikings took over the Slavic city of Novgorod and by 882 one of their leaders, Oleg, captured Kiev.

Kiev was located on the main trade route connecting the Baltic Sea with the Black Sea and the Byzantine Empire, and Kiev's army defended Russia against invading tribes from the south and east. So the Kievian prince became the Grand Prince during the 900s, ranking above the other Russian princes. It was Grand Prince Vladimir I who made Christianity the state religion in 988.

Kiev's power waned after the turn of the century and local princes fought each other for the next couple hundred years. Then, in 1237, Batu, a grandson of Genghis Khan, led 200,000 or so Mongols into the area and began destroying towns. Kiev was leveled in 1240 and Russia became a part of the Mongol empire's Golden Horde. During this period, the Byzantine Empire was flourishing culturally south of the Black Sea, but was declining as a world power, and the Holy Roman Empire dominated Europe.

The Mongols were mostly interested in collecting taxes and knocking the hell out of anyone challenging them. They let local princes run the political show. In the early 1300s, Prince Yuri of Moscow married the sister of the Golden Horde's big shot Khan and was appointed Grand Prince in 1318. This was a big Mongol mistake. The Moscow Grand Prince became increasingly powerful, while the Mongols fought among themselves and became weaker. In 1480, Grand Prince Ivan III (known to history as "the Great") took firm control of the area around Moscow and told the Khans to go suck eggs.

So far so good. But during the period of Mongol rule, the European renaissance and reformation bypassed Russia, creating a cultural gap between the two regions that still exists. Between Ivan the Great and 1547, when Ivan the Terrible (IV) became the nation's first Czar, Russia was confined to the area around Moscow and north to the Barents Sea. It was referred to as Muscovy. It had no territory on the Baltic Sea and didn't even control Kiev, or other areas just north of the Black Sea.

Ivan the Terrible, however, made some changes. Indeed, he can be considered the father of the modern Russian state. He was the first of many genuine nut cases to run Russia. He formed the first of many brutal special police units. He launched the first of many reigns of terror, killing hundreds of local princes, aristocrats and church leaders, and burning towns and villages.

He gave his victims' land to the guys who did the dirty work for him. Then, to assure that ownership of the land was worth something, he established serfdom, which bound the peasants to the land forever. This became the basis for Russian economics for hundreds of years and further differentiated that nation from Europe, where serfdom was dying out as an economic system.

In addition, Ivan the Terrible began Russia's aggressive program of territorial expansion that continued, with a few setbacks, for the next 450 years. Ivan captured a lot of land in the southeast from the Tartars, opening a route to the Caspian Sea. He crossed the Urals and conquered western Siberia. He tried to expand westward to the Baltic Sea, but the Lithuanians, Poles, and Swedes stopped him in the long, bloody Livonian war.

For ten years or so after his death in 1604, all hell broke loose. This period is still known as the "Time of Troubles." The government fell apart; the Poles and Lithuanians invaded, capturing Moscow and running the place for a while. But the Russians united, drove them out, and in 1613 Mikhail Romanov was made czar. His offspring ran Russia for the next 300 years, until the February Revolution of 1917.

During the 17th century, Russia under Mikhail and two other Romanovs (Alexis and Theodore III) took control of much of the Ukraine after years of war with Poland, Lithuania, and Sweden. They also expanded eastward to the Pacific. But they could not meet the enormous demand for products from the eastern forests because hostile Swedes, Poles, and Turks blocked the sea and land routes to Europe. The only real outlet Russia had was the Barents Sea, but this was open only during the summer months.

Peter the Great went to work on this problem early in the 18th century. By 1721, he achieved his “window to the West” by beating the Swedes out of Estonia and Livonia (part of Latvia) on the Baltic Sea. Catherine the Great completed the job, dividing up Poland with Prussia at the end of the 18th century, taking what is now the Republic of Byelorussia and most of Lithuania.

She also moved south, and by the end of the century had fought two major wars with the Turks, annexing the Crimea and the whole northern region around the Black Sea. Her grandson, Alexander I, took a great deal more Turkish land around the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, parts of what is now Georgia and Azerbaijan.

In 1812, Napoleon invaded Russia. But he got caught in a Moscow snowstorm and the rest is history. Russia emerged with control over another large chunk of Poland, including the Warsaw area and Poland ceased to exist.

Nicholas I, another real sweetheart who liked secret police and killing people, took over in 1825. He fought two wars with the Turks in the Balkans in an effort to gain access to the Bosphorus straits leading from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. During the first, in 1828, he picked up some territory around the Black Sea. But in 1853, Great Britain and France joined the Turks, and Russia lost the Crimean War.

In 1856, Russia agreed to give up land gained in 1828 and to keep no Black Sea navy. In 1877, Russia was back invading the Balkans again. But again it lost. In

the meantime, however, Russia looked eastward. It completed the acquisition of the whole of northern Asia as far as, and sometimes into, the great mountain chains which separate it from Persia, Afghanistan, India, and China. Military domination over Kazakhstan east of the Caspian was completed by 1854. Mountain campaigns between 1857 and 1864 completed Russian control of the Caucasus in Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The armies then took Uzbekistan, Turkmenia, Tajikistan, and Kirghizia.

In the Far East, Russia won land from China in 1858 and 1860 and immediately established Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan. In 1875, it traded the Kurile Islands with Japan for a piece of adjoining coastal land on the southern Sakhalin Peninsula, and in 1891 began building the Trans-Siberian railway to Vladivostok. Vladivostok, however, was not a warm water port, so in 1886 Russia leased Port Arthur (on the Yellow Sea across from Korea) from the Chinese, conned them into a strip of land across Manchuria, and began building a spur line of the Trans-Siberian.

The Japanese didn't like this, so they went to war with Russia in 1904 and won. Russia agreed to leave Manchuria and return southern Sakhalin to the Japanese. Japan didn't, however, get the Kurile Islands back. During this extraordinary latter half of the 19th Century, the ordinary Russian citizen was having a tough go of it under the harsh rule of Czars Alexander III and Nicholas II.

In 1914, World War I broke out. In 1917, before the war ended, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, a.k.a. Lenin, and the Bolsheviks seized the Russian government and withdrew from the war, signing a separate agreement with Germany called the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, in which they gave up large areas, including Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Poland and the Ukraine.

Also, after the war, Armenia, Georgia, and parts of Azerbaijan declared independence and set up independent Republics. These latter independent Republics lasted only from 1918 through 1921. After the civil war between the Bolsheviks and the anti-communists, the Red Army took them back.

Given Russia's prior history of rule by a series of murderers, sociopaths, maniacs, incompetents, drunks, and mental defectives, Lenin fit right in. He was a psychopath. True to form, he was succeeded by someone who was even more deranged than he, namely Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili, a.k.a. Josef Stalin. We noted the following about this wretched duo in a 1997 piece entitled "Homo Homini Lupus," in which we discussed a book by R. J. Rummel entitled *Death by Government*.

Together, these two were responsible for the murder of nearly 50 million people, the great majority of them citizens of the Soviet Union. Lenin was responsible for "only" four million or so of these, most of whom were slaughtered in his attempt to seize and consolidate power during and after the Revolution. He pales in comparison to Stalin. To put this in perspective, realize that Lenin is the fifth most prolific mass murderer in the history of the planet, and Stalin was 10 times his better. Rummel says this about the victims.

"Some were from the wrong class – bourgeoisie, landowners, aristocrats, kulaks. Some were from the wrong nation or race – Ukrainians, Black Sea Greeks, Kalmyks, Volga Germans. Some were from the wrong political faction - Trotskyites, Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries. Some were their sons and daughters, wives and husbands, or mothers and fathers....Then some were simply in the way of social progress...and some were eliminated because of their potential opposition, such as writers, teachers, churchmen; or the military high command... .In fact, we have witnessed in the Soviet Union a true egalitarian social cleansing and flushing; no group of class escaped...."

On August 23, 1939, one week before the start of World War II, Hitler sent foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop to Moscow to sign a secret "non-aggression" pact with Stalin. It provided that neither

nation would attack the other, that each could conquer territories without interference from the other, and divided Poland.

On September 1, 1939, Hitler raised the curtain on the war by invading western Poland. On September 17, Stalin declared that Poland "ceased to exist as a state," and the U.S.S.R. invaded eastern Poland.

On November 30, the U.S.S.R. attacked Finland, which surrendered in March 1940. In June 1940, the Red army moved into Bessarabia (then part of Rumania) and into Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Then on June 22, 1941, Hitler violated the pact he had made with Stalin and invaded Russia. Nikita Khrushchev later noted that Stalin was so shocked that Hitler would break his word that he became hysterical. Commenting on this, British historian Paul Johnson, in his best seller *Modern Times*, notes that "Stalin, who trusted nobody else, appears to have been the last human being on earth to trust Hitler's word."

At the end of World War II, what was then called the U.S.S.R. kept control of a big chunk of Poland, the Baltic States, and Bessarabia. It incorporated the latter into a new Soviet Republic called Moldavia. And, of course, it established Communist puppet governments in Albania, Hungary, what was left of Poland, Bulgaria, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany.

On August 6, 1945, after the war in Europe was over, the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan. Two days later, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and invaded Manchuria and Korea and took back the Kurile Islands. It left Manchuria and Korea eight months later. But it holds the Kurile Islands to this day, despite howls of protests from Japan.

On December 27, 1979, Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan. In February 1988 Soviet troops withdrew from that country. In late 1989, the Berlin Wall fell. In late 1991, the Soviet government collapsed. By the end of that year Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan,

Ukraine, and Georgia had all become independent states. And, of course, the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe had all proclaimed their independence from the Russian bear.

Now it is admittedly risky to generalize about 11 centuries of Russian history. But one cannot review this account without being struck by the constancy over an entire millennium of the violence, deceit, and ruthlessness with which princes, czars, and Communist dictators alike have pursued selfish and nationalistic aims with little or no regard for humanity, even within their own borders, or for the concept of some sort of social contract governing relations between men. Nor can one review this history without concluding that Russia is not going to shed its status as the world's largest and longest-lived on-going criminal enterprise any time soon. We discussed this point at some length in a 1997 article entitled "Whither Russia," in which we said the following:

We are not saying here that we believe that Russia and the United States are about to enter into open hostilities. In fact, we think trade and other on-going commercial, social and diplomatic exchanges between the two nations will continue apace.

But we do think that Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's recent claim that Russia and the United States "are all on the same side" was not only naive, but stupidly naive, just as it was throughout the Cold War period, when her position was basically the same. For the fact is that on a great many important issues, the two nations clearly don't see eye to eye, and aren't likely to any time soon . . .

To put this thought into some historic context, I think it would be worthwhile to briefly review a piece in the June, 1996 issue of *Commentary*, entitled "Russia's Past, Russia's Future," by Richard Pipes, a preeminent scholar of recent Russian history.

According to Dr. Pipes, history teaches that the Russian state has little or no foundation outside of its ability to project to its subjects the image of invincible power. Both the Russian monarchy and its Communist successor, he notes, legitimized their authority by projecting to their subjects their overwhelming military strength. "What better way," Pipes asks, "to inculcate among their own people the sense of futility of resistance than to show that the whole world feared Russia?"

As a consequence, Pipes maintains, there has arisen an intimate link between Russia's status as a great power and its internal stability. He puts it this way. "One of the principal reasons for the collapse of czarism in 1917, rarely mentioned by scholars captive to the class-war theory of history, is the steady decline of the monarchy's claim to great-power status as a result of military defeat in the Crimean war of 1854-56, the diplomatic setback following the Balkan war of 1877-78, the debacle in the conflict with Japan in 1904-05, and finally the repeated thrashing at the hands of the Germans in World War I. As a consequence of these humiliations, the monarchy, in the eyes of its subjects, lost the 'mandate of heaven,' and all the more so since it also proved itself unable to cope with radical terrorism on its home territory."

As a result, Pipes argues, Russia has had far greater difficulty adjusting to the post-colonial era than any other European state. The loss of empire has truly damaged the image of mother Russia in the eyes of her people. As Dr. Pipes so eloquently states: "In Russia . . . the sense of ethnic identity was always indissolubly linked with empire, and its loss has produced bewilderment and anguish.

Indeed nothing so much troubles Russians today, not even the decline in their living standards or the prevalence of crime, and nothing so lowers in their eyes the prestige of their government as the precipitous loss of great-power status. A superpower under Communism, a peer of the United States, their country is now, they feel, treated like a third-world nation, the humble recipient of Western largesse. A great deal of the appeal of the red-brown (Communist-Fascist) coalition derives precisely from its promise to restore to Russia the status of a respected – that is, feared – world power.”

Finally, we will conclude with the following from an article we wrote almost exactly 10 years ago, in August 1998, entitled “The Russian Meltdown. Who Didn’t Know?”

Optimists describe what is going on in Russia today as “nascent capitalism;” the first, necessary step in becoming “just like us.”

This is, of course, possible. We’re not exactly sure how such a process would work. But we would expect that it would entail the consolidation of criminal activity under a few kingpins, who would eventually conclude that their best interests, and those of their children, would be served by the imposition of a legal structure that would protect their ill-gotten gains from competing crooks. And slowly, but surely, a decent society would emerge.

Frankly, we think this is extremely unlikely. But even if it were to happen, such an evolution would take decades to accomplish, and in the meantime, corruption would reign, which would mean that economic cycles would be deadly.

We don’t want to sound like a broken record on this, but an evolution from a criminally run economic system to a true, capitalist economy, as described by Adam Smith, would, we believe, require that Russian society rediscover some sort of moral framework.

This too is not impossible. But it should be understood that the spiritual infrastructure of the Russian Orthodox Church was badly damaged by the communists. John Neuhaus put it this way in the January 1995 issue of his wonderful magazine, *First Things*.

“While Orthodoxy will have to play the primary role in any moral and spiritual rejuvenation of Russia, this requires that Orthodoxy itself undergo significant changes....Under communism, many thousands of bishops, priests, monks, nuns, and lay people were killed for their Christian witness. The celebration of the Russian martyrs is a source of spiritual renewal, but at the same time it raises awkward questions about current church leaders who, with few exceptions, collaborated with the Evil Empire....

Yet, unlike both Protestants and Catholics in the West, Orthodoxy had no occasion to develop, either conceptually or practically, the ways of coping with the often troubling dynamics of democracy and the free market. Under communism, Orthodoxy was a fragile refuge from the world. Now it is being called upon to restore the moral character of a people who see only confusion, chaos, and the ascendancy of a gangster elite beyond the reach of any legal or moral authority. [A German writer, Barbara] von der Heydt’s conclusion is sobering: ‘As daunting as the economic and political tasks are, reforming the character of the nation’s

soul is far harder yet. But in the absence of such a moral transformation, there can be no lasting economic or political reform. The destruction of the Russian soul was so devastating that it will take years for the country to find its compass. A free and stable Russia cannot emerge immediately. Indeed, it may take more than a generation. The children of Israel wandered forty years in the wilderness, unlearning the traits of slavery in Egypt before entering the Promised Land. Russians may be entering their wilderness years in their exodus from the slavery of communism.”

In the meantime, gentle reader, don't be surprised by periodic economic meltdowns in Russia, or the emergence of leaders who are extremely nationalistic and antagonistic to Western interests. That's the other side of the wonderful "globalization of the world" story that we've all heard so much about since the Berlin Wall fell and the financial markets began screaming upward.

THE WORLD'S LARGEST CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE, REDUX.

For a week now, the popular press and its analysts have been dissecting the "war" for parts of the sovereign state the Republic of Georgia and explaining to us wee folk who won, who lost, who is better off, and why. There are variations in the telling of the tale, mind you, but immediately, two near universals emerged in the preponderance of the coverage.

First, the Russians won. They did what they wanted to do and proved that they could have done more. Putin made his point.

Second, and more to the point, the United States lost. Russia is "a player" again, and its re-emergence into the global arena comes at the expense of post-

9/11 America. President Bush was caught off guard, though there's not much that he could have done about it anyway. The "multi-polar" world is back, and American global hegemony has been shattered. It was no coincidence, by the way, that Russia's target was an American ally armed with American weapons that had been actively petitioning to join the American-driven defensive umbrella of NATO. Russia's gain is the United States' loss. Or so the story goes.

Now, for all we know, most of this may be so. Russia may be the big, bad bear on the block again, and George Bush may be storming around the Oval Office even as we write, muttering obscenities and fretting over the lost legacy of hyper-powerdom. But we doubt it.

For starters, it is slowly but surely becoming clearer that Russia did not score the impressive victory Putin and his apologists had wanted the world to believe. The mighty Russian army steamrolled into tiny Georgia, but it did not quite finish the job, stopping short of Tbilisi and short of total control of the country. All of this begs the question: why? Why even bother with Georgia proper at all? The breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were easy enough, but why not stop there? What purpose was served by trying to take all of Georgia, but not doing so?

Moreover, as well as the Russian army may have performed, did anyone really expect anything else? And was the army's performance strong enough to make up for weaknesses exposed in the other branches of Russia's military? Consider, for example, the following, written by military blogger and author Austin Bay:

Russian troops beat the Georgians on the ground, not so much because of superior numbers, but because the Russians had more troops with combat experience, and very recent experience in fighting this kind of war. The Russians got this way by fighting a successful campaign just across the border, in Chechnya.

There, several hundred thousand Russians and pro-Russian Chechens have gotten valuable combat experience. The Chechen rebels (a mixture of nationalists, gangsters and Islamic radicals) have been reduced to a few hundred hard core fighters. The Russians basically use Chechnya as a training ground where their “contract soldiers” (volunteers, who are much more effective than conscripts) can get some combat experience. These volunteers are particularly common in paratrooper and commando units. Both were apparently used in the ground operations that pushed the Georgians out of South Ossetia, and conquered key areas elsewhere in Georgia. Some of the “Russian” troops were apparently Chechen paramilitary units . . .

The Georgians did better in the air and at sea, even though they were greatly outnumbered there as well. Georgian warplanes shot up the Russians pretty badly (killing the commander of Russian ground forces, for example) before the Russians were able to shut down the Georgian air force. But in the process Russia lost at least four aircraft destroyed, and a number of others badly damaged.

At sea, Georgian missile boats hit several Russian warships, which had not been equipped with equipment, or crews, that were capable of dealing with this kind of threat. Two Russian warships were damaged sufficiently that they had to withdraw from the area. Within a few days, however, Georgia’s miniscule navy and air force were destroyed, largely by the much larger Russian air force.

We can’t help but think that Putin overplayed his hand in Georgia. The guy may be a KGB mastermind, but then, if KGB masterminds were all they were cracked

up to be, the government that they served – indeed, the nation that they served – would still exist. But it doesn’t.

As for the loser in this episode, we suppose that an argument can be made that it was the United States, for a variety of reason: Georgia is pro-American, with troops in Iraq; American intelligence was caught off guard (shock!); the American military is spread too thin to be able to open up a 3rd front; etc. Still, it strikes us that presumption that the invasion of Georgia has anything at all to do with the United States is a, well, presumption. George Bush and Dick Cheney are constantly accused of being arrogant in the conduct of their foreign policy, but their purported arrogance pales in comparison to that of the American journalists, analysts, columnists, and others who think that everything, everywhere is about them, or their country. Maybe we’re naïve. But maybe Russia vs. Georgia is about Russia and Georgia. Is that possible?

Obviously, this is not to say that this show of force by Putin and his thugs has not had consequences outside of Russia and Georgia. It has. But, in our estimation, they’re not the consequences with which most analysts are currently preoccupied.

To illustrate our point here, we’d like to take a brief look at the immediate reaction to the crisis by two of Russia’s European neighbors. First, there’s France. Dear old, France. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion, French President Nicolas Sarkozy took it upon himself, as the leader of the world’s foremost “soft” power, to stick his nose into others’ business and to put an “end” to the violence by talking about it. His efforts were rewarded with a much-heralded, cease-fire agreement between the two warring nations. Which lasted, maybe 15 minutes.

Now, we don’t mean to pick on Sarko. Certainly, as French president’s go, he’s among our favorites. But France’s vaunted “soft power” is precisely that, soft. Russia paid it superficial diplomatic respect and then proceeded to ignore it. Sarko boldly took the initiative,

achieved his end, proclaimed himself a victor, and then watched as the real world turned him into a loser. Again, this isn't his fault so much as it is the natural consequence of soft power. France, Germany, Belgium and the rest all talk a good game. But that's all they do, talk. And the Georgian crisis simply emphasized that point to a global audience.

It is easy to forget, now that he has been made the scapegoat for the pre-surge failures in Iraq, but former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was one of the most articulate and insightful cabinet members this country has had in a long time. And in 2003, he had the following famous exchange with the Dutch journalist Charles Groenhuijsen:

Groenhuijsen: Sir, a question about the mood among European allies. You were talking about the Islamic world a second ago. But now the European allies. If you look at, for example, France, Germany, also a lot of people in my own country -- I'm from Dutch public TV, by the way -- it seems that a lot of Europeans rather give the benefit of the doubt to Saddam Hussien than President George Bush. These are U.S. allies. What do you make of that?

Rumsfeld: Well, it's -- what do I make of it?

Groenhuijsen: They have no clerics. They have no Muslim clerics there.

Rumsfeld: Are you helping me? (Laughter.) Do you think I need help? (Laughter.) What do I think about it? Well, there isn't anyone alive who wouldn't prefer unanimity. I mean, you just always would like everyone to stand up and say, Way to go! That's the right to do, United States.

Now, we rarely find unanimity in the world. I was ambassador to NATO, and I -- when we would go in and make a proposal, there wouldn't be unanimity.

There wouldn't even be understanding. And we'd have to be persuasive. We'd have to show reasons. We'd have to -- have to give rationales. We'd have to show facts. And, by golly, I found that Europe on any major issue is given -- if there's leadership and if you're right, and if your facts are persuasive, Europe responds. And they always have.

Now, you're thinking of Europe as Germany and France. I don't. I think that's old Europe. If you look at the entire NATO Europe today, the center of gravity is shifting to the east.

Never have Secretary Rumsfeld's observations about the differences between "old Europe" and "new Europe" been so readily apparent. While Sarko and the French were prattling on and accomplishing little, the Czechs, the Poles, and even the Ukrainians were taking concrete steps, both to solidify their relationship with the United States and to demonstrate to Comrade Putin that his attempt to intimidate them had failed.

The Poles, for example, used the Georgian crisis to break a long-standing deadlock and to sign a pact allowing the United States to station anti-missile defenses on Polish territory. The Czechs had already agreed to base the necessary radar station on their territory. And now the Ukrainians appear to want in on the deal. And all of this is intended not simply to ensure Eastern Europe's safety, but to make clear to Putin that his aggression will simply solidify the burgeoning alliance between the United States and the former Soviet satellites. As Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk declared:

Poland and the Poles do not want to be in alliances in which assistance comes at some point later -- it is no good when assistance comes to dead people. Poland wants to be in alliances where assistance comes in the very first hours of -- knock on wood -- any possible conflict.

The obvious message here being that Poland has received assurances that the United States' commitment to its security is steadfast and uncompromising.

And why shouldn't it be? In the seven years since 9/11 no one, short of the Brits and the Israelis, has been more supportive of the United States, of President Bush, and of the long-term American goal of expanding liberty and destroying tyranny than have the former Warsaw Pact nations. Poland immediately and instinctively sent troops to help in Iraq; and not just any troops, mind you, but their best, their Special Forces. The Czechs have been second only to President Bush in their public denunciations of tyrannical regimes and their expressions of solidarity with oppressed peoples. Indeed, no one – not even the United States – has been harder these past few years on the unreconstructed Communists in Cuba. Additionally, the Albanians, Hungarians, and a handful of others have been incredibly supportive, symbolically, if not literally.

What this suggests, to us at least, is that Rumsfeld was right, and the center of Europe is, in fact, shifting eastward. If you're looking for "winners" here to balance out the losers in Western Europe, it is the Czechs, the Poles, and the rest of the former Soviet satellites, all of whom differ from the Western European brethren in that they understand first-hand the crushing power of tyranny and authoritarianism. These folks lived it. And they remember it. And they're not about to repeat it or let others suffer unduly.

Western Europe will, naturally, always remain uniquely allied with the United States. But for the near-term at least, global security concerns will, we're certain, make the Eastern bloc countries far more relevant than "old Europe." As we noted above, France and Germany may talk the talk. But Poland and the Czech Republic, among others, walk the walk.

So what, in the grand scheme of things does all of this mean? Probably a great deal less than most of the opinion-makers would like for us to believe. Sure, the world now understands that Russia is an angry failed state led by a conniving KGB thug. But is that really news? Anyone who didn't know that already wasn't paying attention. After all, it's been more than a year since John McCain declared that he looked into Putin's eyes and "saw three letters: K-G-B." And it's been more than two years since McCain started calling for Russia to be expelled from the G-8. Russia's "aggression" is hardly a surprise.

But nor is it, in our opinion, necessarily a sign of greater restiveness and a return to Czarist or Communist imperialism on Russia's part. Russia is a dying country. If demography is destiny, then Russia is destined for the graveyard. Naturally, the emaciated and drunken bear will not go gently into that good night and still has the ability to cause quite a few problems as flails about wildly. But the idea that Russia can even consider the possibility of regaining its Soviet-era status in the world is absurd, to say the least. Russia's population is dwindling; its life-expectancy is dropping; and its future is bleak. Right now, the country is flush with petro-dollars and beer-muscles (or vodka-muscles, if you prefer). But it is a threat to be a pain in the United States' backside, not a threat to reestablish hegemony or dictate global affairs.

Regular readers will undoubtedly recall that we have been calling Russia "the world's largest criminal enterprise" now for more than a decade. It remains so and thus remains a global player. But it is not the player it once was. And it never will be. Putin may think he's won something, and certainly the American press thinks he has. But we kinda doubt it. And even if he has, we're not sure that what he won is worth much.

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