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The Cold War Culture War

by James Carden

How to explain the current nadir in U.S.-Russia relations? The litany of oft-cited causes is by now familiar and includes, but is certainly not limited to, the expansion of NATO, the dispute over Kosovo, the American abandonment of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the Russo-Georgian War, and the war in Ukraine, as well as allegations (by both governments¹) of election meddling. Over the course of the past decade and a half, U.S.-Russia relations have also been shaped—and not for the better—by the disparate foreign policy approaches taken by American and Russian governments.

Less well known, however, is that America's growing animus towards all things Russia is also characterized by the hostility borne of a frustrated project of liberal cultural imperialism. In the years following the end of the Soviet Union, the idea that Russia was “ours to lose” gained wide currency in American foreign policy circles. The Clinton administration sought to dismantle the remaining state apparatus of Soviet-era Russia and replace it with a new liberal civil society that took its cues from Washington. In that way, it was believed, Russia could never again pose a challenge to the West.² Of course, such efforts did not succeed, but our “culture war” approach to foreign policy has only intensified since then. The failure of this project has contributed significantly to the present animus towards Russia and continues to hinder more reasonable diplomatic relations.

POST-COLD WAR DREAMS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

Shaping and defining the acceptable confines of Russian “civil society” has been an ongoing American project for much of the past quarter century. Writing for *The Nation* in 1999, David Rieff observed that, at the time, “most well-intentioned people now view the rise of civil society as

the most promising political development of the post-Cold War era.”² That was certainly the case with the undoubtedly well-intentioned planners in the Clinton White House, who sought to harness the latent energy of Russian civil society (or at least those segments of it that were deemed to be consistent with the project of “Westernizing” the former Soviet state). As Strobe Talbott, the Clinton administration’s primary Russia hand, admitted in 2002, “. . . we invested a lot of our bilateral aid program in trying to help Russian NGOs, independent media outlets, and local reformers change the bad habits of the past and put in place the institutions of a modern society, economy, and political culture.”⁴

In this way, the U.S. State Department, rather than acting as the government’s lead agent of diplomatic engagement with another sovereign country, instead acted more in the manner of an NGO, picking winners and losers from among a country’s political, social, and religious life, with predictably dismal results.

Needless to say, the project of trying to remake Russia—economically, culturally, politically—in America’s image went terribly awry. Not long after the collapse of the Soviet regime, in 1993, Russian president Boris Yeltsin used the army to dissolve the democratically elected parliament and soon after constructed an autocratic “super-presidency,” which he would later hand off to his hand-picked successor, a former KGB operative named Vladimir Putin. In the meantime, tens of millions of Russians sank into poverty during one of the largest economic and demographic collapses recorded in peacetime.⁵

The failure of this project to remake Russia in the 1990s rankled those American economic, media, and political elites who unwisely embarked upon it. In due course, this disappointment gave rise not to a newfound introspection about the wisdom of such efforts, but instead motivated a search for someone or something to blame.

At first, it was not immediately obvious that this misplaced frustration would find its target in the person of Russian president Vladimir Putin. Indeed, many western observers seemed hopeful that the intelligence operative turned politician was someone who, like his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, would acquiesce to Washington’s prerogatives. In their rush to embrace Putin, prominent Clinton administration officials—such as Secretary of State Madeline Albright, now among Putin’s most vociferous critics⁶—at the time angrily dismissed “all this psychobabble about Putin and the KGB thing.”⁷

But in the years following, Putin’s numerous affronts against the American-led “postwar international order”—including his opposition to regime change in Iraq (2003), Libya (2011), and Syria (2011), as well as to the so-called “color revolutions” that took place in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004), and finally the Russian intervention in the Ukraine since 2014—caused a rapid

turnabout in the American establishment's opinion.

In a speech before the February 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin castigated the United States for its repeated violations of international law. This may have been the point of no return. From then on, the American political establishment would, over the course of the succeeding decade, seek to isolate, undermine, and anathematize Putin. The reason for this is straightforward: the American establishment's "unipolar fantasy"⁸—spawned in the immediate afterglow of the end of the Cold War and taken to absurd lengths by the Bush administration after 9/11—had no place for a Russian leader who would declare, as Putin did in Munich, that "Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years. It has always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy. We are not going to change this tradition today."²

RUSSIA'S PLACE IN AMERICA'S INTERNAL CULTURE WARS

While Putin's robust expressions of Russia's independence from the American projects of democracy promotion and regime change set hands wringing, his innate conservatism has provoked further alarmism, allowing foreign policy differences to take on the tone of a culture war. Putin's Russia—conservative and predominantly Orthodox Christian—today serves as a kind of all-purpose bogeyman for young journalists-on-the-make and for opportunistic politicians looking to cash in on the current hysteria. Over the course of the past several months, the American media has invariably painted Russia as a kind of dark bulwark of hardline Christian Right values standing athwart the forces of light and worldwide social progress.

Last July, former CIA acting-director Mike Morell opined that "The Russians are playing in a broader scope of issues here than just the election . . . I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the Russians are trying to divide us on issues from gay rights to race."¹⁰

In August, *Politico* published a piece entitled "Why the Pope Loves Putin," which claimed that "a visible relationship with the Vatican is an opportunity to highlight Russia's effort to portray itself as a bulwark of morality and traditional values in contrast to an increasingly secularized Europe."¹¹ It is telling that no less a figure than Pope Francis can be now be branded as yet another one of Putin's "useful idiots."

The New Republic recently warned that the "problem is not just the nature of Putin's autocratic government, which uses social conservatism and nationalism to hold together a nation frayed by massive economic inequality." What should really worry right-thinking Americans, wrote a cultural critic not previously known for his expertise on Russia or U.S. foreign policy, is that "Russia's foreign policy threatens to export many of the Putin regime's worst features, particularly xenophobia and homophobia."¹²

Indeed, the prevailing narrative is that Vladimir Putin serves as a source of aid and comfort to far Right ethnonationalists here at home. According to the *New York Times*, among “white ethnocentrists, nationalists, populists, and neo-Nazis, [Putin] is widely revered as a kind of white knight: a symbol of strength, racial purity and traditional Christian values in a world under threat from Islam, immigrants and rootless cosmopolitan elites.”¹³

Yet in typical sleight-of-hand fashion, the aforementioned *Times* report then goes on to note, a full fifteen paragraphs later, that for his part “Mr. Putin has never personally promoted white supremacist ideas, and has repeatedly insisted that Russia, while predominantly white and Christian, is a vast territory of diverse religions and ethnic groups. . . . Nor has he displayed any sign of hostility toward Jews, a fact that has infuriated some of Russia’s more extremist nationalist groups.”

But facts have rarely gotten in the way of the current narrative, painstakingly crafted by our cultural warriors, that Russia is, in the words of one American think tank fixture, “anti-immigration” and “anti-Muslim”¹⁴ and led by a man who embodies “ignorance, racist prejudice, a love of power and total disregard for factual accuracy.”¹⁵

Some have also sought to tie America’s small but increasingly vocal number of white supremacists to Russia. In the aftermath of the neo-Nazi terror attack in the city of Charlottesville, Virginia, a CNN legal analyst opined that the incident in Charlottesville “suggests an opening for Russian intelligence to use domestic hate groups as a vehicle for escalating their active measures inside the United States.”¹⁶

In her campaign memoir, *What Happened*, Hillary Rodham Clinton describes Putin along similar lines as “the leader of an authoritarian, xenophobic international movement that wants to expel immigrants, break up the European Union, weaken the Atlantic alliance, and roll back much of the progress achieved since World War II.”¹⁷

None of this is to imply that Russia is beyond criticism, of course. Yet much of the current anti-Russia invective reeks of an attempt to project blame for America’s own internal problems. Russia may now be a figure employed by multiple sides in America’s domestic culture wars, but it can hardly be held responsible for creating these social tensions. It is also a very *selective* culture war that is being waged. After all, we rarely, if ever, see similar fulminations against the post-Maidan regime in Ukraine—itsself a coalition of oligarchs and the far Right¹⁸—or against the serial human rights abusers of the Saudi peninsula, among others.

“THE HISTRIONICS OF MORALISM AT THE EXPENSE OF ITS SUBSTANCE”

It should be noted that much of this anti-Russia sentiment *predates* the crisis in Ukraine and the Russian meddling during the 2016 U.S. election. It is my view that the culture war crusade actually helped to prepare the ground for the anti-Russia hysteria roiling Washington today.

U.S.-Russia relations suffered a precipitous decline during the Obama years, when American disdain for Russia intensified because the latter refused to order its domestic affairs in a manner pleasing to American media and foreign policy elites. Indeed, according to one knowledgeable observer, “The hatred against Putin among Democrats really emerged in the Obama years, when liberal American identity politics suddenly became a useful tool for regime change enthusiasts in Washington.”¹⁹

The idea that Russia is an enemy culture in addition to a geopolitical adversary has since gained wide purchase among American media and political elites. As one prominent commentator put it: “Russia has been targeting the American right since at least 2013, the year Putin enacted a law targeting pro-gay rights organizing and delivered a state-of-the-nation address extolling Russia’s ‘traditional values’ and assailing the West’s ‘genderless and infertile’ liberalism.”²⁰ More recently, a former Moscow bureau chief for the *Financial Times* said that Putin “sees, correctly, that the equality of all sexual orientations is widely proclaimed in the West but not uniformly accepted, allowing Russia to pose as a beacon of hope for Western reactionaries.”²¹

To be fair, the concern over gay rights in Russia didn’t simply materialize unbidden; in 2013, Russia did pass a federal statute outlawing “the promoting of nontraditional sexual relationships among minors.” The statute, which was declared illegal by the European Court for Human Rights last June, can be considered objectionable by (fairly recent) American standards, but we might do well to ask: Why are we Americans so sure that we should be the ones to act as the arbiters of a universal liberal morality? Particularly given the fact that, as recently as January 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear a challenge to a Mississippi state law which allows state employees and private businesses to discriminate against gay people on the grounds of religious belief.²²

Nevertheless, during the Obama years, the media’s focus on LGBT issues in Russia, particularly during the run-up to the Olympic Games in Sochi,²³ became coupled with the American establishment’s bizarre obsession with the fate of the performance art group “Pussy Riot” (a feminist performance art group convicted of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” after a protest inside a Russian cathedral). At the time, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland expressed concern that the group’s “disproportionate” sentences would have a “negative impact on freedom of expression in Russia.”²⁴ And perhaps that was so. But as scholar Robert David English pointed out: “Both activists and state officials in the United States praised Pussy Riot and demanded their release . . . basic decency—and regard for the values and traditions of

others—would suggest that hailing Pussy Riot as champions of free speech was disrespectful of Russia.”²⁵ “It was also insensible,” said English, “if the United States is interested in cultivating sympathy among Russians, some 70 percent of whom identify as Orthodox believers.”²⁶

How far out of hand did the American elite’s secular canonization of Pussy Riot get during the Obama years? According to the late Edward S. Herman, between January 1 and March 31, 2014, the *New York Times* “ran twenty-three articles featuring Pussy Riot and its alleged significance as a symbol of Russian limits on free speech.” Herman went on to note, by way of contrast, that “in February 2014, eighty-four-year-old nun Sister Megan Rice was sentenced to four years in prison for having entered a U.S. nuclear weapons site in July 2012 and carried out a symbolic protest . . . No op-ed columns or meeting with the *Times* board for Rice. There are worthy and unworthy protesters, just as there are victims.”²⁷

Over the past several years, prominent American liberals and neoconservatives have joined together to condemn Russia for being insufficiently in thrall to the tenets of American identity politics. In so doing, they have demonstrated that Culture War liberalism is very much a bipartisan project.

That is not to say that I have an unsympathetic view of American identity politics. I personally am not in the slightest bit disturbed by the decision the Supreme Court came to in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, for example. Many of the rhetorical stances of U.S. identity politics are understandable reactions to longstanding, unaddressed grievances. Successes achieved as a result represent important and just gains for a number of underrepresented groups.

But I am most certainly *not* in favor of forcibly propagating American civil liberties worldwide. Our current method, which is a combination of rhetorical shaming (via annual State Department human rights reports) and economic warfare (via sanctions) is extremely misguided. The problem comes in when moralistic impulses begin to intrude on the execution of a reasonable, responsible, and rational foreign policy, which is where we are today.

The scholar-diplomat George F. Kennan once observed that the “moral obligations of governments are not the same as those of the individual.” For Kennan, the “primary obligation” of government “is to the interests of the national society it represents, not to the moral impulses that society may experience.” He decried what he called “the histrionics of moralism at the expense of its substance,” by which he meant “the projection of attitudes, poses, and rhetoric that cause us to appear noble and altruistic in the mirror of our own vanity but lack substance when related to the realities of international life.”²⁸

Kennan recognized that the “histrionics of moralism” are a poor substitute for informed debate.

but, alas, we are left with little else in the era of Russiagate. Culture War liberalism, endlessly hyped by nominally Left media outlets like MSNBC and Mother Jones, has given rise to the idea that Russia is far more than a geopolitical competitor. It is, supposedly, home to a sinister, alien culture, the very existence of which threatens the American “homeland.”²⁹

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

This brings us to the obvious question of whether there is an alternative to the Culture War liberalism that has helped to derail U.S.-Russian relations.

Professor Jan-Werner Müller of Princeton has identified a particular strain of Cold War liberalism that might serve as an antidote to the Culture War liberalism so in vogue in the U.S. today. Müller’s Cold War liberalism, in stark contrast to Culture War liberalism, does not expect or demand conformity; it instead urges caution, and is alive to the attendant dangers of utopian projects to remake the world.³⁰ As Müller explains, there is a “distinct stand” of twentieth century liberal thought exemplified by Isaiah Berlin, Raymond Aron, and, to a lesser extent, Karl Popper, whose “*negative* liberalism” (a variety of what Judith Shklar called the “liberalism of fear”) emphasizes the imperative to avoid cruelty and atrocity first.

According to Müller, this strand of Cold War liberalism was “a skeptical liberalism concerned primarily with avoiding the worst, rather than achieving the best.” It was “fearful of ambitious programs advanced by those who felt absolutely certain in their convictions and sure about their political prescriptions.” For Berlin, in particular, Müller notes that “values could not be chosen against the background of some absolute moral or historical certainty; they could not claim universality.” For these Cold War liberals “there was only certainty about uncertainty.”

As for Aron, Müller writes, “hope for compromise and moderation became a kind of trademark of his later liberalism.” The late historian Tony Judt also noted Aron’s “disenchanted realism.” For Aron, “we must look at the world not as we wish it to be but as it is. This duty was incumbent, he believed, on observers and practitioners alike.”³¹ Judt observed that throughout Aron’s writing, there was a sense that “some goals are desirable, others are not. But the point is always to ask what is possible in the circumstances in which men find themselves and to proceed—whether as observer or actor—from that starting point.” Indeed, according to Judt, Aron’s “distaste for the monist doctrinaires of the Left was matched by his dismissal of dogmatic free-marketeters or minimal-state advocates of the Right.”³²

But it is Judith Shklar’s essay *The Liberalism of Fear*³³ that offers perhaps the clearest expression of Müller’s Cold War liberalism. As Shklar’s political philosophy was deeply informed by her background, a quick biographical sketch may be in order. Born in Riga, Latvia, in 1928, Shklar and

her family fled when the war came. Shklar recalled that just before the war broke out, “My uncle put us on a plane to Sweden where we remained far too long, until well after the German invasion of Norway. By then there was only one route out of Europe, the Trans-Siberian railroad, which slowly took us to Japan. It was not an easy trip, but miraculously we escaped.”³⁴

According to Shklar, “intellectual modesty does not imply that the liberalism of fear has no content, only that it is entirely non-utopian.” Indeed, it “must avoid any tendency to offer ethical instructions in general. No form of liberalism has any business telling the citizenry to pursue happiness or even to define that wholly elusive condition.” Shklar looked askance at the crusader’s mentality, writing that “it may be noble to pursue ideological ambitions or risk one’s life for a ‘cause,’ but it is not at all noble to kill another human being in pursuit of one’s own ‘causes.’”

Shklar evinced a skepticism toward political spirituality and utopian political projects, a skepticism that once had at least had some purchase among the American elite.³⁵ But this is no longer the case. It is hard to escape the conclusion that those like Shklar, who nearly lost their lives because of totalitarian ideologies, were rather more skeptical about political views that claim to appropriate—always and everywhere—the moral high ground.

Contrast, for a moment, the skepticism of Müller’s Cold War liberals with the smug certitudes of our new culture war liberals. They believe that their political inclinations are not simply correct but also universal, and that they should be spread, as one longtime neoconservative has advised, “at gunpoint if need be.”³⁶ They are ardent defenders of pluralism at home, yet they are the most vocal advocates for a kind of liberal cultural monism abroad.

In the end, perhaps, the problem boils down to this: American policy and media elites have become distracted by what probably ought to be third- or fourth-order considerations regarding Russian domestic affairs, issues that are ultimately for Russians, not Americans, to contend with. In other words, identity politics and culture wars have their place—within domestic contexts.³⁷ But the idea that American customs and mores can be imposed on Russia from the outside is a fantasy, and a dangerous one at that. Still more, efforts on the part of the U.S. government to do so are likely to be counterproductive: they will only put a target on the backs of those we say we wish to help.

And so, within the context of U.S.-Russia relations, identity politics should have no place. It has only contributed to the deterioration of relations between the world’s two nuclear superpowers, who, if they treated each other in normal diplomatic terms, could become—not necessarily allies—but, at a very minimum, partners in addressing certain shared challenges such as nuclear non-proliferation and terrorism.

¹ Putin accused the Clinton State department of interfering in Russia's electoral process in the run up to his re-election in 2012; embittered Clinton partisans are now returning the favor, and then some.

² Sherle Schwenninger, email to the author

³ David Rieff, "The False Dawn of Civil Society," *The Nation*, Feb. 22, 1999.

⁴ Strobe Talbott, Clinton's Deputy Secretary of State in an exchange with journalist and historian Anne Applebaum: Strobe Talbott, "The Russia Hand," *Slate*, June 11, 2002.

⁵ For an authoritative account of America's misadventures in Russia during the Clinton administration see: Stephen F. Cohen, *Failed Crusade* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).

⁶ See, for example: Damien Sharkov, "Putin is a 'Smart but Truly Evil Man,' Says Madeleine Albright," *Newsweek*, Apr. 20, 2016.

⁷ Cohen, *Failed Crusade*, 244.

⁸ The term is Professor David Calleo's: see his *Follies of Power*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁹ Vladimir Putin, "Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy" (transcript), *Washington Post*, Feb. 12, 2007.

¹⁰ Josh Rogin, "National Security Figures Launch Project to Counter Russian Mischief," *Washington Post*, Jul. 11, 2017.

¹¹ Jacopo Barigazzi, "Why the Pope Loves Putin," *Politico*, Aug. 11, 2017.

¹² *New Republic* senior editor Jeet Heer is a specialist on comic books—but not foreign affairs. See: Jeet Heer, "Why the Anti-War Left Should Attack Putin, Too," *New Republic*, Jul. 25, 2017.

¹³ Alan Feuer and Andrew Higgins, "Extremists Turn to a Leader to Protect Western Values: Vladimir Putin," *New York Times*, Dec. 3, 2016.

¹⁴ Clint Watts, of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, on Twitter, Aug. 14, 2017.

¹⁵ Masha Gessen, "How Putin Seduced Oliver Stone – and Trump," *New York Times*, June 25, 2017.

¹⁶ Yale Law School's Asha Rangappa, "Could Charlottesville open a door for Russia?" CNN, Aug. 23, 2017.

¹⁷ Hillary Clinton, *What Happened* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 332.

¹⁸ Which is, as of this writing, a tacit, though fragile, alliance between oligarchs (President Petro Poroshenko) and the Ukrainian far-right (Speaker of the Ukrainian parliament Andriy Parubiy).

¹⁹ Pietro Shakarian, PhD candidate in Russian studies at Ohio State, email to author

²⁰ James Kirchick, "How the GOP Became the Party of Putin," *Politico*, Jul. 18, 2017.

²¹ Robert Cottrell, "Russia's Gay Demons," *New York Review of Books*, Dec. 7, 2017.

²² On US Supreme Court decision, see: Pete Williams, "Supreme Court Allows Mississippi Anti-LGBT Law to Stand," NBC News, Jan. 8, 2018.

²³ Travis Waldron, "Will LGBT Protests in Sochi Have Any Effect on Vladimir Putin's Russia?" ThinkProgress, Feb. 7, 2014.

²⁴ John Hudson, "White House, State Department Back Pussy Riot," *The Atlantic*, Aug. 17, 2012.

²⁵ A personal anecdote may help further illustrate the point: In October 2012, as part of my State Department duties, I accompanied a Manhattan-based documentary filmmaker on a cultural tour of Russia. At a school event in a small town not far from Yekaterinburg, the filmmaker, after giving his presentation to a very receptive and excited group of teenage students, shouted, unbidden: "Free Pussy Riot!" The reaction he expected was not the one he received—stunned and annoyed silence.

²⁶ Robert David English, "Russia, Trump, and a New Détente," *Foreign Affairs*, Mar. 10, 2017.

²⁷ Edward S. Herman, "Fake News on Russia and Other Official Enemies," *Monthly Review*, Jul. 1, 2017.

²⁸ George F. Kennan, "Morality and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 64, no. 2 (Winter 1985/86).

²⁹ For a particularly egregious example of such thinking, see veteran journalist and Russia hand David Satter, "A Christmas Encounter With the 'Russian Soul'," *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 22, 2017.

³⁰ Jan-Werner Müller, "Fear and Freedom: On Cold War 'Liberalism'," 2006.

³¹ Tony Judt, introduction to Raymond Aron's *Dawn of Universal History* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

³² Judt.

³³ Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989).

³⁴ Shklar, "A Life of Learning" (lecture), American Council of Learned Societies, Apr. 6, 1989.

³⁵ See, for instance, Saul Bellow's 1970 novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. The protagonist, Artur Sammler, is a refugee who once fought as a partisan in wartime Poland. Of Sammler, Bellow writes, "Like many people who had seen the world collapse once, Mr. Sammler entertained the possibility it might collapse twice." This is as good and pithy a summation of Cold War liberalism as any.

³⁶ Max Boot, quoted in Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, "American Empire, Not 'If' but 'What Kind'," Brookings Institution, May 10, 2003.

³⁷ One important caveat: if countries receive huge amounts of American largess, then their domestic arrangements, which we are then inevitably identified with, may consequently be subject to American influence or criticism.