
Putin and the Polite Pundits

Arthur Herman

ON SEPTEMBER 1, the leaders of the European Union, having already warned Moscow several times of its obligation to meet the terms of the cease-fire agreement with Georgia, held an emergency meeting in Brussels and decided to—issue another warning. If Russia continues its non-compliance, the leaders threatened, another warning may yet follow.

Such are the pitiful realities of international diplomacy, and of an all too familiar Western pattern of response to acts of blatant aggression by powerful dictators. It is embarrassing enough when governments, with responsibility for the security of millions, resort to such hand-wringing hesitancy. It is worse when analysts and critics who are free to speak their minds on everything under the sun start looking for reasons to avoid placing blame for aggression squarely where it belongs—on the aggressors—and instead strive conspicuously to spread it around among the bystanders and even the victims.

Such was the response to Russia's August 9 invasion of the pro-Western democracy of Georgia by the *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. Under the title "What Did We Expect?," Friedman dutifully awarded an Olympic-style gold medal for

"brutal stupidity"—stupidity, not criminality—to Vladimir Putin, the man who actually sent in the troops and tanks. But then Friedman quickly went on to confer a silver medal for "bone-headed recklessness" on Mikheil Saakashvili, the president of Georgia, whose country suffered the attack. The bronze for "short-sightedness" went, needless to say, to George W. Bush (shared, retroactively, with Bill Clinton).

Friedman's reasoning went like this. By trying "to cram NATO expansion down the Russians' throats," the United States had mortally injured the feelings of the former superpower, a nation still smarting from defeat in the cold war. As if that were not provocation enough, Russia now confronts the prospect of former Soviet republics like Estonia, Ukraine, and Georgia joining the community of liberal democracies, and has also been asked to tolerate an anti-missile defense system the Bush administration wants to install across Eastern Europe. Offenses like these, Friedman wrote, had been "critical to fueling Putin's rise" to power, and they all but ensured a crisis like the one with Georgia. Friedman's views were echoed by, among others, former Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev, who as much as told the United States it could expect worse if it undertook to provoke Putin and Russia again.

And in what had Saakashvili's sin consisted? By daring to use military force to put down Russian-backed separatists in the breakaway Ossetian re-

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gion, he, too, had supposedly compelled Putin to invade. The *Economist*, denouncing Saakashvili as “an impetuous nationalist,” did not shrink from calling *his* actions “foolish and possibly criminal.” Michael Dobbs of the *Washington Post* wondered how the Georgians could have been guilty of such a gross “miscalculation”; they must have known that Russian peacekeepers would be killed or wounded in the fighting, thus inevitably triggering a harsh Russian response. And so forth.

In the weeks after the invasion, one would search long and hard for speculations of a different and arguably more pertinent sort. Why, for instance, have former Soviet-bloc nations like Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia been so anxious to get into NATO in the first place—or to have a missile-defense shield installed in their backyards? Who *were* those Russian “peacekeepers,” and what were they doing in South Ossetia? How is it that Moscow was prepared to respond to the Georgian “provocation” with such massive force, and on such short notice?

We now know that Putin’s troops had been on the move along the border of Georgia and the Ossetian region for weeks; that the Russians had been handing out Russian passports to Ossetian “citizens” for months, and since April had been preparing local railroad tracks for the movement of armored troop trains; and that, by August 8, at least 150 Russian tanks were poised for action on the border separating South and North Ossetia. What the evidence suggests is that, far from reacting defensively, Putin and the Russian president Dmitri Medvedev deliberately aimed to elicit Georgia’s move into South Ossetia, aiming to exploit this as a pretext for wresting away both that region and Abkhazia to the west.

To be sure, no one, from Thomas Friedman to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to those European leaders meeting in Brussels, has any “illusions” about Putin. Almost from the day he came to high office in 2000, Western media, policy analysts, and politicians have acknowledged his multiple abuses of power, the corruption of his regime, and the spectacular failure of democratic hopes inside Russia. At the same time, however, and grumbling as they go, all have continued to acquiesce in the fact of Putin’s dictatorship over post-Soviet Russia and his growing encroachment on the rights and territories of the newly independent but still sovereign countries around him. Indeed, the transparency of Putin’s put-up job over Georgia, together with the West’s so-far supine response, follows a pattern of its own, and it too has been discernible from the day he came to power.

VLADIMIR PUTIN broke onto the Russian national scene in 1996, at the age of forty-one. A former law student and KGB professional, he had been the political protégé of Anatoly Sobchak, the mayor of St. Petersburg and a leading advocate of Western-style rule of law during the chaotic years of Boris Yeltsin’s presidency. Unlike many Russian politicians, Putin had lived abroad and could speak both German and English. Despite his KGB résumé, his early speeches were full of references to the need for democratic reform and for close ties between Russia and the West. When the faltering Yeltsin appointed him as his prime minister and successor in August 1999, it was largely in hopes that, as a lawyer with a Ph.D. in economics, Putin would carry out the necessary political and legal measures to correct the havoc resulting from the “shock therapy” of economic deregulation.

Little noted then or later was that Putin had gone to law school precisely in order to be recruited into the KGB. The secret-police agency, to which he would devote sixteen years of his life, exercised an enormous influence on him. Among other things, it bred a deep contempt for civil society and its governing norms; according to his biographer Richard Sakwa in *Putin: Russia’s Choice* (2007), he became convinced that, for all the agency’s ruthlessness and resort to systematic deception, the KGB was the only component of Soviet and, later, Russian society that actually worked and that enjoyed a sense of professional integrity. His entire political career may be seen as an extension of the lessons learned in those years.

This, however, was not how most Western analysts saw Putin when he assumed the presidency in 2000. To the Russian specialist Steven Solnick, for example, Putin was largely a transitional figure. He faced such enormous institutional constraints, including the legislated division of power between Russia’s federal and provincial authorities, that he would likely accomplish little or nothing during his time in office. While acknowledging Putin’s anti-democratic belief “that the needs of the state trump the rights of the individual,” and his “troubling” arrest of a Radio Free Europe reporter covering the guerrilla war in Chechnya in 1999, Solnick nevertheless concluded that the new president would find it hard to implement any truly repressive policy.

Stephens Holmes of New York University’s law school, in a widely reprinted essay titled “Simulations of Power in Putin’s Russia,” was even more dismissive of the Russian leader’s KGB past and authoritarian tendencies. Arguing against what he dubbed the School of Fear, Holmes expressed con-

fidence that, Putin or no Putin, the Kremlin was simply incapable “of imposing authoritarian discipline on Russian society.”

In fact, however, the regime was already beginning to move aggressively in just that direction. Although Friedman would later try to connect this development with the latitude afforded Putin by the rise in oil revenues—“as the price of oil goes up,” Friedman would write, “the pace of freedom goes down”—Putin’s first crackdown on the independent Russian media went back to New Year’s Eve 1999, predating his assumption of the presidency and at a time when oil still averaged \$17.00 a barrel. Then, in June 2000, came the arrest on trumped-up charges of Vladimir Gusinsky, the head of the television network NTV. In November of the same year, Boris Berezovsky, another oligarch and the owner of the independent TV station ORT, fled to exile in London, lamenting that “all the decrees, all the laws proposed by Putin are directed at again enslaving people.”

At the time, it was widely believed that Berezovsky, hardly a model citizen, was just another among the many disgruntled oligarchs—Yeltsin-era monopolists who had enriched themselves by taking over former state industries at bargain-basement prices and whom Putin was trying to bring to heel. But this was simplistic. Putin was not at odds with the oligarchs; they had been and remained indispensable to him. But he was bent on intimidating them into doing his bidding, or else replacing them with creatures who would. In Sackwa’s euphemistic phrasing, Putin wanted to open “a new phase in which the [Russian] administration sought to shape the economic sphere by sponsoring ‘national champions’”: i.e., those willing to play ball. The analyst Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Endowment was more direct about it. “Instead of using the courts” to deal with those who might have broken the law, she observed, Putin was relying on “strong-arm tactics led by the MVD [Ministry of Internal Affairs], the FSB [the successor to the KGB], and the prosecutor general.”

The process of liquidating recalcitrant oligarchs reached a high point in October 2003 when Mikhail Khodorkovsky, head of the mammoth oil company Yukos and Russia’s wealthiest man, was summarily thrown into prison—a crowning signal that Russia’s economy, like its media, would no longer enjoy an independent existence. Although the old arrangement of behind-the-scenes kickbacks and profiteering remained in place, the leading oligarchs were now Putin men, many of them former KGB and security-services people like him-

self. “As in Soviet days,” Sackwa writes gingerly, “law was used instrumentally.”

STILL, TO many Western observers, Putin’s authoritarianism, distasteful as it undeniably was, seemed a not intolerable price to be paid for Russia’s emergence as a stable society, one with which, in the phrase of the day, the West “could do business.” Moreover, it was possible to point to an important gauge of Putin’s success—namely, his popularity at home. Opinion poll after opinion poll showed that Russians not only endorsed his style of governance—a 2002 survey suggested 57-percent approval of press censorship—but, in sharp contrast with the mood of the Yeltsin years, felt a growing sense of “optimism about the future.”

No wonder, then, that Putin would win reelection in March 2004 with 71.2 percent of the vote (although two out of every three Russians had stayed away from the polls or voted against him). The speech that launched his reelection bid—“I am certain that only a developed civil society can ensure the stability of democratic freedom and the guarantees of human and civil rights”—pushed every sensitive Western button. Could it be that a new era was dawning after all? No one wanted to inquire too closely into what Putin meant by a “developed civil society,” or how he intended to get there.

For Fareed Zakaria that year, Putin was a leading example of “illiberal democracy”—i.e., a system run by a genuinely popular authoritarian. True, Zakaria admitted in *The Future of Freedom* (2004), “there will be absolutely no one left to check the Kremlin” if Putin were to continue along the way he was going. But at least he “want[ed] to build a modern Russia,” and if this succeeded, the country might yet “become a normal industrialized country with some of the liberal features” of a genuine democracy. “Perhaps,” Zakaria added hopefully, “he even believes that eventually Russia will be able to democratize its political system.” Only not yet.

James Billington, the distinguished Russian expert and former Librarian of Congress, was compelled to agree. Like others, Billington had plenty of doubts about Putin: the parliamentary elections in December 2003, he wrote, marked “a clear victory for the authoritarian-nationalist over the liberal-democratic impulses in the new Russia.” Still, that was Russia for you—a country that “would find its true identity,” in Billington’s judgment, “only by reasserting top-down central authority—what Russians called the ‘power vertical’—against the democratic trends that had been developing from the bottom up.”

Strobe Talbott, who had been the principal architect of Russia policy in Bill Clinton's State Department, took a similar view in a *New York Times* op-ed piece on May 12, 2004. Talbott quoted with approval from Putin's oath of office for his second presidential term: "only a free people in a free country can be genuinely successful." Yes, he conceded, the regime was increasingly repressive. Yes, having largely snuffed out the opposition, Putin was under no real internal pressure to liberalize. But again it was those stubborn Russians—a people who "want to modernize their country, but [who] are determined to do it in their own way, not according to some Western formula or by Western standards."

About one thing, observers like Zakaria, Billington, and Talbott were right: alternatives to Putin were few on the ground. There was a lonely figure like Garry Kasparov, the chess champion and democratic dissident whom Billington thought something of a nut. There was also a resurgent Communist party, which was threatening explicitly to turn back the clock to Soviet days. Even more menacingly, there were crude Nazi-style nationalists like Boris Zhirinovskiy, whose party had doubled its seats in the 2003 parliamentary election. And there was the Rodina party, a Slavophile grouping advocating a sharp break with the West and the re-nationalization of the entire Russian economy. Putin may not have been an ideal leader for Russia by Western standards; but under the circumstances, he seemed a fairly balanced choice.

Yet as Billington himself was aware when he wrote *Russia in Search of Itself* (2004), the Rodina party was itself an artificial creation, its radical populist message having been concocted by Putin himself in order to split the vote on the Communist Left. Thanks to the help of such decoys, and to the elimination of any truly democratic opposition, Russian parliamentary politics was becoming a masquerade, behind which Putin's dictatorship continued to consolidate itself.

Sounding his own hopeful note, Talbott ventured that perhaps a drop in oil prices, in tandem with "the logic of what Russians call 'life itself,'" might finally force Putin to resolve the contradiction between his democratic-seeming rhetoric and his authoritarian politics. In fact, however, oil prices were about to rise steeply, from \$34.00 to \$61.00 a barrel by 2006, and Putin was already learning that, whatever Western leaders might say in criticism of his harsh practices, there was little they would do. To the contrary: the more he seemed to pursue a hardline policy at home, the readier the United States and Europe appeared to embrace him.

BACK IN September 1999, when Putin was barely a month into his first term as prime minister under Boris Yeltsin, apartment blocks in the cities of Moscow, Buinaksk, and Volgograd were rocked by a series of bomb explosions. Three-hundred people were killed. Putin immediately blamed the attacks on separatists from the breakaway region of Chechnya in the North Caucasus and promised swift action against the "terrorists."

By that point, public opinion had largely turned against the on-again off-again war that had been going on in Chechnya since 1994. In the words of Peter Truscott in *Putin's Progress* (2004), people "couldn't believe Russia would re-fight the first Chechen war, with the huge human and financial cost that would involve." But that was exactly what Putin vowed to do—with the coming presidential election as his backdrop. A figure almost unknown to the Russian public until then, he was suddenly a person of high profile. To this day, theories linger that the FSB set the bombs in order to focus Russian public opinion on the Chechen issue, and on Putin as the nation's savior.

More than 80,000 Russian troops poured into Chechnya in a full-scale invasion. Future historians may well see the assault on that province as the blackest of the black marks against Putin, and the West's relative silence as one of its greatest moral failures. As documented by a handful of intrepid Russian journalists like the soon-to-be-assassinated Anna Politkovskaya, torture, beatings, massacres, and looting by drunken and out-of-control Russian soldiers were commonplace.* By official count, 4,200 Russian soldiers were dead by 2002, though soldier's rights groups and human-rights activists said the true figure was three or four times higher; at least 100,000 Chechens would eventually die in the conflict.

When public confidence in the war flagged again in 2002, a new series of domestic attacks reignited national hysteria. In October of that year, a terrorist managed to seize a theater in Moscow and hold 800 hostages. Then came the massacre at a school in Beslan in 2004. Each time, Putin gained new executive powers to step up the war effort in Chechnya. And he did eventually succeed in breaking the back of Chechen resistance—by, to borrow the phrase of the Roman historian Tacitus, making a desert and calling it peace.

Apart from some human-rights groups, the West remained largely silent about what, if carried out by the United States or a European country, would

* *A Small Corner of Hell: Dispatches from Chechnya* (2003).

certainly have been branded as ethnic cleansing. Instead, the EU and the U.S. largely accepted Putin's explanation that the Chechen separatists were really Islamic extremists, and that the war was Russia's corner of the ongoing struggle against Islamist terrorism. Answering his critics in the West, Putin employed much the same vocabulary that he invokes today against critics of his actions in Georgia: what business does the U.S., a country that invaded Iraq, have questioning how Russia chooses to deal with its own internal threats?

Another card Putin was able to play to win Western acquiescence was his supposed cooperation in the war on terror. In this connection it is useful to recall that the Soviet Union had been a leading *sponsor* of international terrorism during the 1970's and the heyday of the PLO. The prospect of Russia's now working as an active partner in combating Islamic terrorism must have seemed irresistible to European and American statesmen and intelligence services. But a prospect is what it largely remained.

In reality, Russia's role when it came to rogue nations like Saddam Hussein's Iraq and later Ahmadinejad's Iran was the exact opposite of what Putin sought to portray. Next to France's Jacques Chirac, he was Saddam's most reliable ally in the months leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the Security Council, Moscow consistently blocked Washington's push for international action, finally forcing the Bush administration to move without an explicit vote of UN approval. In the light of later disclosures about the UN's corrupt Oil-for-Food program, it is easy to appreciate what was behind this: fully 30 percent of the recipients on Saddam's list of payoffs were Russian. To this day, Putin continues to oppose U.S. policy in Iraq, just as he resolutely opposes any firm action against Iran (one reason, incidentally, that he has remained popular with some on the European Left).

BY THE time his second presidential term started in 2004, Putin's attacks on domestic opponents were turning ever more blatant and deadly. In April 2003, the parliamentary deputy Sergei Yushenkov, a leading liberal, was shot dead outside his Moscow apartment; the murderer was never found. In July, another deputy, Yuri Shchekochikhin, died mysteriously of what seemed to be poisoning. Viktor Yushchenko, a Ukrainian presidential candidate who publicly advocated stronger ties to the West, came down with a similarly mysterious illness, but eventually recovered.

Not so fortunate was Alexander Litvinenko, a former FSB officer and outspoken critic of Putin.

His slow and agonizing death in London in November 2006 was the result of contamination by a chemical, polonium-210, well-known to Russian intelligence agents. This was almost certainly a case of murder, as was the killing a month earlier of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya. Her death, like Litvinenko's, went officially unsolved.

Each of these occurrences duly elicited cries of outrage in the West, but little else. The general response seemed to be: tread cautiously, things could always be worse. When, in 2005, some made bold to call for Russia's exclusion from the G-8 summit, Strobe Talbott warned heatedly that any such strategy would backfire. Turning our backs on Putin, he wrote, would be "a sign that the West is giving up on Russia" itself, and would further dishearten Russian democrats. Instead, the way to proceed was by means of "quiet calibrated democracy," which might yet induce Putin "to reaffirm principles of good governance" and thus provide a way "to nudge Russia in the right direction."

Talbott's argument, like that of many others, rested on a simple proposition: for all his iron-fisted rule, Putin was creating the necessary preconditions to the country's "evolution as an open society" by restoring national confidence and rebuilding the Russian economy. But was that true in 2005, and is it true today? A powerful recent article in *Foreign Affairs* by the Russian experts Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss casts severe doubt on the claim.

Although the Russian economy did expand by 69 percent between 1999 and 2007, eleven of the fifteen former USSR republics did better, and only one, Kyrgyzstan, did worse. (Former Soviet-bloc countries like the Czech Republic and Poland did *far* better.) The driving engine of Russian growth, moreover, was not real economic output but oil and gas exports. It was somewhat like the case of Saudi Arabia: take away the petrodollars (\$350 billion in 2007), and Putin's Russia emerges as another Third World country.

Nor is it the case that Putin's rule has created a more stable business climate, for Russians or anyone else. In 2006 the World Bank ranked Russia at 96th out of 175 nations for favorable investment opportunities—the country's worst-ever showing. Putin's steady threats to cut off oil and gas to his neighbors has led to a mass exodus of foreign investors. According to the economist Judy Shelton, who correctly predicted the economic collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, Putin "has yet to learn that capital does not respond well to extortion."

What is true of business is true in other areas as

well. Globally, in terms of rule of law, Russia ranks in the bottom fifth of nations (again according to the World Bank). In terms of overall governance, it ranks in the 38th percentile from the bottom. In the words of the British analyst Martin Wolf, Putin's huge expansion of state power has resulted not "in an effective state, but [in] an overweening one."

By the beginning of 2008, in any case, the idea that the West could continue to "do business" with Putin was seeming increasingly illusory. This left only one further justification for putting up with him: that his regime, however brutal and corrupt, at least did not threaten the stability of post-cold-war Europe. As Stephen Kotkin of Princeton assured an audience in February 2007, Russia's foreign outlook was neither assertive nor resentful, and the country "is really only threatening to itself."

Unfortunately, Kotkin spoke just before Putin threatened to cut oil and gas supplies to nations like Poland, and just before Russia launched an attempt to disrupt Internet service in the Baltic republics. But wishful thinking dies hard. This past February, responding to Martin Wolf's dire portrait of Putin's Russia in the *Financial Times*, the economist Vlad Sobell wrote: "I strongly disagree . . . that Putin is a 'dangerous failure.'" On the contrary, "what is dangerous is the poisonous, but unfortunately now well-embedded notion that the 'increasingly aggressive' Russia is about to menace us."

Six months later, Russian tanks rolled into Georgia.

HOW DO we explain this long-running inclination (to put it no more strongly) on the part of knowledgeable observers to avert their eyes from the challenge posed by Putin and his regime?*

Part of the answer, certainly, lies in Putin's skill at talking the democratic talk while walking the authoritarian walk. As an exercise in deceptive rhetoric, his two terms as Russian president were stunningly successful in conveying the impression that at some point he would deem it possible, for the future good of Russia, to relax his iron grip. And it was not just Westerners who chose to believe him or to rationalize his repressive actions. "The model for Russia in the early 90's was Poland," the Russian liberal Vladimir Ryzkhov told Fareed Zakaria in 1999; "now it's Chile under Pinochet." Ryzkhov, like Zakaria, thought Putin might turn out to be the Russian Pinochet, "a good czar."

But was there ever any good reason to assume that a man whose every instinct seemed geared *away* from the values of a free society would willingly

lead the way to such a society? In fact, the real issue may not have been excessive trust in Putin himself—which almost no one was guilty of—but an excess of distrust in the ability of the Russian people to make the transition to democracy. The possibility that Russia might have within it the moral, intellectual, and cultural resources to become a free, open, and stable democracy on its own, without the stern guiding hand of an authoritarian leader, has seemed, to many, wildly unrealistic.

Some have traced this supposed national resistance to Western democratic values to the country's history and anti-liberal legacy under czars and Soviets. The same explanation serves, paradoxically, to explain Putin's popularity. Why do Russians vote in large numbers? Not because they have a desire for Western-style democracy, but because what they really want is something that Putin supplies in abundance: at best, a kind of plebiscitary democracy, or what Zakaria calls illiberal democracy. In today's Russia, elections provide, in that writer's words, "a cover for authoritarianism and populism."

And is the authoritarian version of democracy such a bad thing? Not in the view of observers like Zakaria. After all, they point out, Western-style liberal democracy is a messy and unpredictable affair, all the more so when imported wholesale into an underdeveloped or emerging nation—or one, like Russia, with an already long history of authoritarian rule. In such cases, liberal democracy becomes a vehicle for rampant corruption, for ethnic strife (as in India), for chaos (as in Russia under Yeltsin), or for the rise of "impetuous nationalists" like Georgian president Saakashvili. By contrast, the Putin model provides a single clear figure with whom we can deal, and on whom we can count.

This may be why, as Natan Sharansky has noted, "democratic governments across the globe, on the Left and the Right, almost always prefer the non-democratic regime they know to the democratic one they don't." But the fallacies underlying this line of thinking are many. In Russia's case, one such fallacy is the belief that the problems of the Yeltsin era sprang from an excess of democracy—more democracy than Russians could handle. Actually, the problem was too few safeguards for democracy, especially in the form of institutions enforcing the rule of law and, specifically, the sanctity of con-

* An important exception is Leon Aron of the American Enterprise Institute, author of a fine biography of Boris Yeltsin. The progression of Aron's change of view about Putin, from cautiously positive to grimly negative, can be traced in the pages of COMMENTARY from November 2002 ("Russia's Revolution") to October 2004 ("Is Russia Going Backward?") to December 2006 ("What Does Putin Want?").

tracts. It was precisely the lack of such institutional safeguards that enabled the rise first of the oligarchs and then of Putin himself.

Another fallacy lies in the notion that only certain societies are capable of achieving democratic breakthroughs. Aside from today's Iraq, a striking counterexample is Georgia itself. For 70 years, from 1921 to 1991, all traces of an independent civil society in that land were stamped out by Soviet occupation. During the first half-decade after the collapse of the USSR, Georgia endured an economic meltdown and virtual civil war with its Abkhaz and Ossetian populations, laboring all the while under a Mafia-style regime as corrupt and narrow as that of any former Soviet republic.

Then, in November 2003, a band of reformers, including Mikheil Saakashvili, launched the so-called Rose Revolution, which kicked out the old regime and instituted a new direction. Observers like Thomas Friedman like to point out that Georgian democracy is hardly perfect. They are right. But it has been evolving steadily and self-consciously in a Western direction, and has sought to be included as part of the Western world through membership in NATO.

This is the self-same liberal-democratic government that many in Europe and elsewhere are evidently willing to see dismembered in order to avoid a confrontation with the illiberal government of

Vladimir Putin. And herein lies the final fallacy—namely, that governments headed by a single leader who makes all the decisions are in fact easier to deal with, and by their nature easier to incorporate into a stable international order, than ones characterized by what Talbott refers to as “free-for-all democracy.” On just these grounds, Henry Kissinger points out in *Diplomacy*, some British statesmen welcomed Hitler's advent to power in 1933. “[Hitler's] signature would bind all Germany like no other German's in all her past,” enthused British ambassador Eric Phipps to his colleagues in London. Five years later at Munich, Britain and France had the opportunity to test the validity of that bond. The lesson was a bitter one.

This time around, we have a chance to learn the same lesson once again—so far, without the high stakes that were involved in the 1930's. Georgia in 2008 is not Czechoslovakia in 1938. Nor are we returning to the cold war. But the final lesson from the rule of Putin should be clear. When we back stability over democracy, we get neither. When we choose democracy over stability, we have an opportunity to build a foundation for both. That is now happening in Iraq, and until the Russian invasion it was happening even more unmistakably in Georgia. Our task for now is to make sure we don't make the same bad choice again. Standing up to Putin, calling him by his proper name, would be a start.