

Sifting & Winnowing

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Was demonizing Putin a smart policy decision?

In 1951, diplomat George Kennan prophetically anticipated waning Communist rule in Russia. “Give them time; let them be Russians to work out their problems in their own way. It is one of the deepest processes of national life. What they need less than anything else is foreign interference.”

Josef Stalin led Soviet Russia from the mid-1920s until his death in 1953. In addition to purges, killings, and imprisonments, Stalin built the Soviet Union into a superpower with its own nuclear bomb. His successor Nikita Khrushchev, who presided over “de-Stalinization” with mixed success, was deposed and succeeded in 1964 by Leonid Brezhnev, whose reign was marked by economic stagnation. Although further consolidating USSR’s position as a superpower, Brezhnev was criticized by successor Mikhail Gorbachev, who in 1988 introduced *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) giving the Soviet people freedom of press and parliament and a mixture of free market and safety net. His plan was intended to take effect gradually over 10-15 years and depended on financial help from the West. What could go wrong? America loved “Gorby.” The Nobel Committee awarded him the prize as a way of offering support to his transition and he attended the 1991 G7 Summit with high hopes—hopes dashed when heads of state told him that International Monetary Fund (IMF) support was contingent on his embracing radical shock therapy, as practiced in Chile, Argentina, and later, Poland. Gorbachev tried to save his program, but hard-line Communists and neo-Stalinists were suspicious of it and in the chaos that followed, Boris Yeltsin in 1991 not only displaced Gorbachev, but also dissolved the Soviet Union. Thus ended a major opportunity that the Reagan/Bush/Gorbachev partnership had provided to set the USSR on a new course and end the Cold War.

Russian history scholar Stephen F. Cohen writes in his 2011 book, *Soviet Fates and Lost Alternatives*, that a widespread belief existed, particularly in Washington, that “post-Soviet Russia, shorn of its superpower status, was virtually irrelevant; the US could pursue its vital interests without Russia.” The unfortunate idea that a new cold war won’t happen or doesn’t matter persists today. “Russia remains more important to US national security than any other country. Despite its diminished status, Russia still possesses weapons that can destroy the US, has the world’s largest gas and oil reserves, and a disproportionate share of iron ore, nickel, timber, diamonds, and gold. Russia has well-educated and creative people and is the world’s biggest territorial country, pivotally situated in both West and East.”

But US officials inserted themselves into Russian politics in 1991 and helped Yeltsin put into place Milton Friedman’s Chicago School austerity economic shock therapy. Yeltsin abolished the constitution and dissolved parliament in what is widely referred to as the “Pinochet option” but what US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers referred to as “momentum for Russian reform.” But events were not proceeding fast enough to suit the IMF, which withdrew the loan Yeltsin was counting on. The Russian people resisted, but it wasn’t enough. Yeltsin burned down the parliament building. Many people were killed and injured in battles dominated by Yeltsin’s army. Then began the great plundering of Russia’s assets. Factories and mines were sold, people lost jobs. According to Naomi Klein in her book *The Shock Doctrine*, “The Communist state was simply replaced with a corporatist one: the beneficiaries of the boom were Party apparatchiks and a handful of Western mutual fund managers who made dizzying returns investing

in newly privatized Russian companies. A clique of nouveaux milliardaires, many of whom were to become part of the group universally known as ‘the oligarchs’ for their imperial levels of wealth and power, teamed up with Yeltsin’s Chicago Boys and stripped the country of nearly everything of value, moving the enormous profits offshore at a rate of \$2 million a month.” The effects of the economic program were so brutal for the average Russian and the process so corrupt, that Yeltsin became very unpopular. War was started with Chechnya to raise his ratings. He won re-election, signaling the selling off of what Lenin once called “the commanding heights,” publicly owned oil and gas and mineral mines, let go for a fraction of their worth to private banks, and later opened up to Royal Dutch/Shell and BP in partnership with two key Russian oil giants.

It was into this massive chaos that Vladimir Putin entered in 1999. With Yeltsin’s alcoholism rendering him increasingly dysfunctional, Russians welcomed a take-charge leader in a country where 80% of farms were bankrupt and 70,000 factories closed, creating an epidemic of unemployment. People living under the poverty line numbered 72 million; 3.4 million children were homeless; suicides doubled; AIDS, heroin addiction, and crime were rampant, and the population shrank.

In light of the wanton destruction wreaked upon Russia during the Yeltsin years in which the US played a major role, it only added insult to injury that Western scholars and politicians not only condoned, but also celebrated Russia’s destruction. It is “desirable,” wrote Harvard historian Richard Pipes, “for Russia to keep on disintegrating until nothing remains of its institutional structures.” In the mid-1990s, anyone who dared question the wisdom of “the reformers” was dismissed as nostalgic for Stalin. When this fiction became impossible to maintain, Russia’s “culture of corruption” was blamed.

But following WWI, Russia’s had successfully adopted a mixed economy model based on the teachings of the venerable writer Nicolai Bukharin. Unfortunately, the reconstituted Communist Party reverted to Stalin, vilifying Bukharin, who became a victim of Stalin’s purge. Anti-communist revisionists supporting Yeltsin’s shock therapy blame Bukharin’s mixed economy for Russia’s slide into Stalinism. But Bukharin’s and Gorbachev’s models were never given a chance to succeed.

Although Putin has no instinct for democracy, he succeeded in somewhat bettering Russia’s wrecked economy; but he is no miracle worker. Although did not start the already-in-place rich/poor divide, he presides over a collective anxiety that is expressed through ethnic violence, distrust, and homophobia. Shock therapy had been said by its proponents to be a way to prevent a repeat of the conditions of Weimar Germany that led to Naziism; but in reality it seems to have the opposite effect. Extreme economic hardship often leads to rightist extremes.

Still, it’s remarkable that Putin has been able to hold the country together at all. Surely, he has made mistakes, but his demonization is an overreaction. Nor is it wise US strategy. Russia is teetering. Putin feels threatened. Cohen says, “The growing authoritarianism and xenophobic nationalism that exists not far from the center of power could lead to a Russia that both possesses weapons of mass destruction and large proportions of the world’s energy headed by men much less accommodating than Putin and more hostile to the West. Blaming Putin for the lost post-Cold War opportunity is orthodoxy among US policy makers, editorialists, and some influential academics. But it is not accurate. The new cold war and the squan-

dering of the post-Soviet peace began not in Moscow but in Washington. BushOne was defeated by Clinton, who began the policy that has continued ever since. Given Russia's potential for both essential cooperation and unprecedented dangers, the Clinton administration inherited a historic responsibility. Its first principle towards post-Communist Russia should have been to do nothing to undermine its fragile stability; do nothing to dissuade the Kremlin from giving first priority to repairing the nation's crumbling infrastructure, do nothing to cause it to rely more heavily on its superpower weapons instead of reducing them, and nothing to make Moscow less than fully cooperative with the West in those and other vital pursuits." Instead, the policy by both Democratic and Republican leaders has been a relentless winner-take-all exploitation of Russia's post-1991 weaknesses—breaking our promises, and demanding unilateral concessions." Being on the defensive is not where we should want Putin to be, if only for self-protection. Clinton broke promises made to USSR by BushOne in 1989, which in addition to reuniting Germany included the assurance that NATO would never move "one inch to the East." So much for that. BushTwo furthered NATO expansion. In 2005, VP Cheney denounced the Kremlin as "no longer a strategic partner and trusted friend." Obama furthered this game with Victoria Neuland's inadvertant disclosure of US intent to influence Ukraine's election. Ukraine is much more than an inch to the East.

Did Bush and Obama forget that following 9/11, Putin's Kremlin did more than any NATO government to assist the US war effort against the Taliban in Afghanistan? Russia saved lives by giving the US valuable intelligence, a Moscow-trained Afghan combat force, and unhindered access to crucial air bases in former Soviet Central Asia. Was Russia wrong to think that in return, the US would give Russia the equitable relationship the US had failed to provide in the early 1990s. Instead, Bush2 withdrew from the ABM treaty, laid claim to permanent bases in Central Asia and Georgia, independant access to Caspian oil and gas, and invaded Iraq (which Putin strongly opposed). Russia also put up with a second round of NATO expansions into several Soviet republics and a growing indictment of Moscow's domestic and foreign conduct. Americans are never reminded of this by most media sources, but the Russian people have not forgotten. They also remember the pivotal part the USSR played in winning WW2. Does the US really want Russia, in its frustration, to form strategic alliances with anti-US and anti-NATO governments and become an arsenal of conventional weapons from hostile states, as Kremlin hawks have urged? US behavior over these past decades has not convinced the Russian people that democracy is something they want to strive for. They associate it with the pain and humiliation they suffered under Yeltsin's rule; the US embracing Caspian Sea dictators in oil-rich states; and the US push to acquire Georgia and Ukraine as NATO partners. Perhaps the Russian people perceive democracy as only for oligarchs. They have enough of those. It's a historical tragedy that the two towering Russian democratic figures were unable to realize their hopes for Russia, but that needn't stop us from heeding George Kennan's wise words today.

Climate change timing

The effort to keep fossil fuels in the ground has just gotten harder. Naomi Klein wrote in *The Nation* May 12 about the delicate balance of nature's migration patterns being out of sync. Caterpillars, for instance, now hatch earlier because spring arrives earlier, while chicks hatch at the usual time, which means that the chicks' food is not there when they hatch as it has always been before. Nature's mistiming because of climate change is being extensively studied by scientists. But Klein thinks that a climate-related mistiming is also happening to us, but in a cultural-historical, not biological sense. Our awareness of a climate

crisis began in the late 1980s, a moment in history "when political and social conditions were uniquely hostile to a problem of that magnitude. Deregulated capitalism began its worldwide spread and the collective sphere started its decline." Addressing climate change requires collective action, and capitalism has reached the point where corporations no longer feel allegiance to anything other than their own profits. This also affects the way individuals have been altered by "both market and technological triumphalism, and lack many of the observational tools necessary to convince ourselves that climate change is real. Just when we needed to gather, our public sphere was disintegrating; just as we needed to consume less, consumerism took over virtually every aspect of our lives; just when we needed to slow down and notice, we sped up; and just when we needed longer time horizons, we were able to see only the immediate present.

"Late capitalism teaches us to create ourselves through our consumer choices: shopping is how we often form our identities, find community, and express ourselves. Thus, telling people they can't shop as much as they want to because the planet's support systems are overburdened can be understood as a kind of attack, akin to telling them that they cannot truly be themselves. This is likely why, of the original 'Three Rs'—reduce, reuse, and recycle—only the third has gotten any traction, since it allows us to keep on shopping as long as we put the refuse in the right box." Klein also says that climate change is slow and we are fast, like driving through the countryside on a bullet train, where everything appears static. Climate change is also place-based, and our culture has caused us to move a lot. Noticing subtle changes in our natural surroundings requires "an intimate connection to a specific ecosystem, which happens only when we know a place deeply, not just as scenery but also as sustenance, and when local knowledge is passed on with a sense of sacred trust from one generation to the next. But even those of us who stay in one place are often unaware that a historic drought is destroying crops outside our climate-controlled homes, since our supermarkets continue to offer an abundance of produce. Only a massive climate disaster catches our attention, and then is replaced in the news by a new crisis before we have a chance to observe the significance of these repeated climate events. It usually does not hit home, and we tend to have to see to believe. This is especially the case with air pollution. Throughout human history there existed a great reverence for the air. Today the air is a dumping ground for the most unwanted products of industry. "We are all products of an industrial project, one intimately, historically linked to fossil fuels." That means we have to try harder to overcome our reluctance to step out of our spheres.

Exporting oil & gas is a slippery slope

It didn't take long, once the Ukraine situation became a crisis, for pundits to tell us that the way to stop Russia from insisting on its own "Monroe Doctrine" was to step up the pace of oil and gas extraction and ship it to Ukraine and European countries who get oil from Russia. Energy Sec. Ernest Moniz, who recently floated the idea of doing away with the Energy Policy and Conservation Act of 1975, which outlawed export of US crude. Lifting the ban reflects oil company complaints that oil refinery capacity is not keeping up with the crude boom. In Oregon, Portland citizens have passed a stay on accepting terminal proposals. Meanwhile, the fight goes on over liquid natural gas facility constructs. Maryland citizens are becoming increasingly resistant to the LNG export facility conversion proposed for Cove Point. It's essential that we protest this ominous threat because once exporting natural gas is legal, the increase of fracking and pipes and tank cars and truck traffic and water and air pollution will boggle the mind. The possibility of slowing climate change, already a slim one, will diminish.

#YesAllWomen

It is known from his writings that Santa Barbara mass murderer Elliot Rodger hated women because they didn't respond to his advances. Most media attribute his crime to mental illness, which is surely a factor along with the availability of guns. But writer Rebecca Solnit, in a *Democracy Now* interview May 27, regards this murder as misogyny in its most extreme form. Leading up to it, the phrase "rape culture" had become widespread in addressing the epidemic of rapes in the military and at colleges. #YesAllWomen hashtag resulted in half a million tweets following the crime that often included the phrases "sexual entitlement" and #NotAllMen, the latter insisting that not all men are rapists. Solnit: "**Of course, all men aren't rapists & murderers. But all women are impacted, in one way or another, by the men who are.**" Women throughout the world tweeted in large numbers about having to plan safe strategies on where, when, and how to go about their daily lives. Solnit wants to extend the focus from Elliot Rodger and look at the broader picture of "how well he fits into a culture of rage that models masculinity and maleness as violence, domination, entitlement, and control. Its non-violent manifestation can be conversational bullying, now known as "mansplaining," says Solnit, the assumption that "because of gender, men are inherently knowledgeable & superior & in control, and we are inherently ignorant and in need of an injection of their knowledge, wisdom, & insight." Misogyny is a continuum running from verbal hostility to anger to physical violence to rape and murder. Three US women are killed every day by a domestic partner, ex-husband, or ex-boyfriend. These crimes will continue until colleges, judges, and the military, but especially men, recognize that misogyny is not genetic.

BPA replacements as toxic or worse than BPA

University of Missouri-Columbia biologist Frederick vom Saal has produced scientific papers on endocrine-disrupting chemical bisphenol A dangers since the 1980s. Since then, 90% of independent studies have corroborated his findings. Industry-funded studies found no ill effects, due to study design flaws that included selecting lab animals known not to respond to the chemical. Fred vom Saal's own account of his findings illustrates the excitement that real, genuine scientists experience when they make a breakthrough. "The issue of the amount of BPA that actually causes effects is difficult to talk about because we're dealing with numbers that are outside the frame of reference that anybody is going to be thinking about. We see profound changes in the course of development of essentially the entire bodies of experimental animals at 50 femtograms of the hormone per milliliter of blood. That's 0.05 trillionths of a gram of this hormone in a milliliter of blood! **This absurdly tiny amount changes the endocrine control region in the brain, accompanied by changes in sex behavior, aggression, behavior toward infants, their whole social interaction, the way they age, the time they enter puberty, changing their whole life history; and these changes are happening at extremely low hormone levels.** I remember the first time I did this I was a post-doctoral fellow, and my advisor and I looked at the hormone levels and said, "My god, these levels are so staggeringly small and the consequences are so immense it's amazing, even to biologists." Ironically, it was Dow Chemical that provided science with the data that led to vom Saal's breakthrough. "It did so because the company couldn't imagine that a millionth of a gram of BPA could possibly matter. But the fact is that human cells respond to BPA at an amount 10 times lower than that. It's called a paradigm inversion. Whenever this happens, it causes a convulsion in the field that is turned upside down, and the result is absolute denial. But there is no reason to assume that effects on human health are not very considerable. If you look at the fish or the human or the frog or the bird at the earliest stages of embryonic development, when the reproductive organs are forming,

you're hard pressed to tell them apart. At the functional level, they're essentially identical. If we were dealing with a topic that didn't have incredible economic consequences, there would be little industry resistance. In the case of the endocrine disruptor, where the chemical we're publishing about would impact profits to GE, Shell, Dow, and other companies that amount to billions for each company, it's a different story."

A ground-breaking expose by Mariah Blake in *Mother Jones* magazine March 3 provides a timeline: BPA was synthesized in 1937. When the Toxic Substances Control Act was passed in 1976, BPA was grandfathered in because it met the standards then in place. In 1996, zoologist Theo Coburn's *Our Stolen Future* reported her findings that synthetic chemicals in pesticides and plastics short-circuited endocrine systems, leading to severe reproductive disorders. Later that year, Congress required EPA to screen 80,000-plus chemicals for endocrine-disrupting effects and report back by 2000 (still not done, not even close). EPA also convened an advisory panel that included industry scientists, some with tobacco ties. In 1997, vom Saal & colleagues published their groundbreaking discovery that **BPA causes severe reproductive problems at levels 25 times lower than EPA's threshold.** In 1998, tobacco companies agreed to curtail deceptive marketing, leading to an exodus of tobacco strategists into plastics and countless other industries. In 2003, as vom Saal published another paper, this time showing 90% of government studies confirming his conclusions, industry managed to influence the group Science International to come up with counter conclusions. In 2007, former Kodak affiliate Eastman Chemical introduced Tritan to replace BPA; but EC's own testing found it more estrogenic than BPA. As states started banning BPA, EC ignored its own research and rushed "estrogen free" Tritan to market, while American Chemistry Council (ACC) convinced the Senate to lift a proposed ban on BPA in baby bottles. In 2012, EC sued 2 independent research groups to prevent them from disproving industry claims in court. The judge helped EC win by barring crucial plaintiff evidence. The outcome convinced EPA to withdraw a proposal that would have labeled BPA as a chemical of concern. Like the tobacco industry, the plastics industry has set a standard of proof that is unreachable. When vom Saal and others used cells as a standard, industry scientists insisted on animal studies. Now they insist on human studies. Industry knows that the effects these endocrine disruptors have on reproductive, neurological, and carcinogenic diseases might take a generation to develop, and in the case of BPA and Tritan, might not appear until the next generation. Tritan is now in many products, Vitamix, Nalgene, Evenflo, register receipts, hospital tubing, food can linings and much more) advertised as BPA-free. The profound effects these chemicals have on our health might in the future explain some of the problems originating from damaged brains, already epidemic in our society. It's tragic that industry colludes with government agencies that were set up to protect our health, and that juries are bullied by industry lawyers. It is especially unfortunate because, although individuals can take steps to reduce plastics use, its unlabeled incorporation into many products and its abundance in wastewater flowing into water systems means that individual actions are insufficient to avoid exposure. Studies will gradually accumulate low-dose impact data and long latencies between exposure and detectable outcomes. But more than enough is known right now, indeed has been known for two decades, to justify immediate federal action. Following publication of the *Mother Jones* story, **FDA announced that BPA was safe at low doses.** Can there be a more cynical example of regulatory irresponsibility than misconstruing the results of decades of independent, peer-reviewed science which indicated so strongly that the real breakthrough was BPA's extremely **low-dose** characteristic?