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## How the World Ends

*Baiting Russia is not good policy*

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Last week I attended a foreign policy **conference** in Washington that featured a number of prominent academics and former government officials who have been **highly critical** of the way the Bush and Obama Administrations have interacted with the rest of the world. Professor John Mearsheimer of the University of Chicago was on a panel and was asked what, in his opinion, has been the most notable foreign policy success and the most significant failure in the past twenty-five years. The success was hard to identify and there was some suggestion that it might be the balancing of relationships in strategically vital Northeast Asia, which “we have not yet screwed up.” If I had been on the panel I would have suggested the Iran nuclear agreement as a plus.

As for the leading foreign policy failure there was an easy answer, “Iraq” which was on everyone in the room’s lips, but Mearsheimer urged one not to be so hasty. In reality the Iraq disaster has killed hundreds of thousands, has cost trillions of dollars and has unleashed serious problems for the Mideast region in general while allowing the rise of ISIS, but in “realistic foreign policy terms” it has not been a catastrophic event for the United States, which had hardly been seriously injured by it apart from financially and in terms of reputation.

Mearsheimer went on to say that, in his opinion, there is a far greater disaster lurking and that is the total mismanagement of the relationship with Russia ever since the downfall of communism. He cited the drive by Washington democracy promoters to push Ukraine into the western economic and political sphere as a major miscalculation as they failed to realize or did not care that what takes place in Kiev was to Moscow a vital interest. To that observation I would add the legacy of the spoliation of Russia’s natural resources carried out by Western carpetbaggers working with local grifters turned oligarchs under Boris Yeltsin, the expansion of NATO to Russia’s doorstep initiated by Bill Clinton, and the interference in Russia’s internal affairs by the U.S. government, to include the Magnitsky Act. There have also been unnecessary slights and insults delivered along the way, to include sanctions on Russian officials and refusal to attend the Sochi Olympics, to cite only two examples.

It should also be noted that much of the negative interaction between Washington and Moscow is driven by the consensus among the western media and the inside the beltway crowd that Russia is again or perhaps is still the enemy *du jour*. Ironically, the increasingly negative perception of Russia is rarely justified as a reaction in defense of any identifiable serious U.S. interests, not even in the fevered minds of Senator John McCain and his supporting neocon clique. But even though the consequences of U.S. hostility towards Russia can be deadly serious, the Obama Administration is already treating Georgia and Ukraine as if they were *de facto* members of NATO. Hillary Clinton, who has called Vladimir Putin another Adolf Hitler, has pledged to bring about their admittance into the alliance, which would not in any way make Americans more secure, quite the contrary, as Moscow would surely be forced to react.

A number of speakers observed that while Russia is no longer a superpower in a bipolar system it is nevertheless a major international player, evident most recently in its successful intervention in Syria. Moscow has both nuclear and advanced conventional arsenals that would be able to inflict severe or even fatal damage on the United States if animosity should somehow turn to armed conflict. Given that reality, if the United States has but a single foreign policy imperative it would be to maintain a solid working relationship with Russia but somehow the hubris inspired recalibration of the U.S. role in the world post the Cold War never quite figured that out, opting instead to see Washington as the “decider” anywhere and everywhere in the world, able to use the “greatest military ever seen” to do its thinking for it. This blindness eventually led to a *de facto* policy of regime change in the Middle East and a turn away from détente with the Russians.

The comments of John Mearsheimer and other speakers became particularly relevant when I returned home and flipped on my computer to discover two news items. First, NATO, with

Washington's blessing, **has admitted Montenegro** into the alliance. I must confess that I had not thought about Montenegro very much since reading how Jay Gatsby showed narrator Nick Carraway his World War I medal from that country in chapter 4 of *The Great Gatsby*. But perhaps in a "Lafayette We Are Here" moment to return the favor bestowed on Gatsby, the inclusion of Montenegro now means that under Article 5 of the NATO treaty the United States is obligated to go to war to defend Montenegrin territorial integrity, something that few Americans would find comprehensible. Russia, which is directly threatened by the NATO alliance even though NATO claims that that is not the case, protested to no avail.

And the second article was far, far worse. It was in **The New York Times**, so it must be true: "The United States Justice Department has opened an investigation into state-sponsored doping by dozens of Russia's top athletes...The United States attorney's office for the Eastern District of New York is scrutinizing Russian government officials, athletes, coaches, antidoping authorities and anyone who might have benefited unfairly from a doping regimen...Prosecutors are believed to be pursuing conspiracy and fraud charges."

Yes folks, the United States government, which has long claimed jurisdiction over any and all groups and individuals worldwide who might even implausibly be linked to terrorism is now extending its writ to athletes who take performance enhancing drugs anywhere in the world. Particularly if those athletes are Russians. Having read the article with disbelief I slapped myself in the face a couple of times just to make sure that I wasn't imagining the whole thing but after the post-concussive vertigo abated there it was still sitting there looking back at me in black and white with a banner headline and a color photo, *Justice Department Opens Investigation Into Russian Doping Scandal*.

Being somewhat of a skeptic, I looked at the byline, expecting to see Judith Miller of weapons of mass destruction fame, but no it was Rebecca Ruiz. Could it be a *nom de plume*? I thought I might be on to something so I reread the piece more slowly second time around. How does Washington justify going after the Russkies? The article noted "In their inquiry, United States prosecutors are expected to scrutinize anyone who might have facilitated unclean competition in the United States or used the United States banking system to conduct a doping program." The article added that some Russian athletes allegedly have run in the Boston Marathon, though they did not win, place or show. If they popped an amphetamine before using their Visa card to dine at Chuck e Cheese when sojourning in Bean Town they are toast, as the expression goes. Likewise for the handful of Russian athletes who have apparently participated in international bobsled and skeleton championships in Lake Placid, N.Y.

And of course there is a Vladimir Putin angle. The Russian sports minister, who has been implicated in the scandal, was appointed by Putin in 2008, so it's all about Russia and Putin which makes it fair game. FBI investigators and U.S. courts are now prepared to go after Russians living in Russia for alleged crimes that may or may not have occurred in the United States based on the flimsiest of grounds to establish jurisdiction. Since much of the world's financial dealings transit through American banks in some way or another the whole world becomes vulnerable to unpleasant encounters with the U.S. criminal justice system. If the accused choose to offer no defense to the frivolous prosecutions they will be

found guilty *in absentia* and fined billions of dollars before having their assets seized, **as happened recently** to the Iranians, who had nothing to do with 9/11 but are nevertheless being hounded to prove themselves innocent.

My point is that the Russians are not exactly failing to notice what is going on. No one but Victoria Nuland and the Kagans actually want a war but Moscow is being backed into a corner with more and more influential Russian voices raised against détente with a Washington that seems to be intent on humiliating Russians at every turn as part of a new project for regime change. Many Russian military leaders have quite plausibly come to believe that the continuous NATO expansion and the stationing of more army units right along the border means that the United States wants war.

Russia's generals base their perception on what they have very clearly and unambiguously observed. When Russia acts defensively, as it did in Georgia and Ukraine, it is accused of aggressive action, is sanctioned and punished. When the Western powers probe Russian borders with their warships and surveillance aircraft they claim that it is likewise aggression when Moscow scrambles a plane to monitor the activity. Washington in its own warped view is always behaving defensively from the purest of motives and Moscow is always in the wrong. But picture for a moment a reverse scenario to include a Russian missile cruiser lounging just outside the territorial limits off Boston or New York to imagine what the U.S. reaction might be.

Washington's misguided policy towards Russia under both Republican and Democratic presidents indeed has the potential to become the greatest international catastrophe of all time, as Professor Mearsheimer observed. U.S. provocations and the regular promotion of a false narrative that Russia is both threatening and seeking to recreate the Soviet Union together suggest to that country's leaders that Washington is an implacable foe. The bellicose posturing inadvertently strengthens the hands of hard line nationalists in Russia while weakening those who seek a formula for accommodation with the West. To be sure, Russia is no innocent in the international one upmanship game but it has been more sinned against than sinned. And the nearly constant animosity directed against Russia by the Obama Administration should be seen as madness as the stakes in the game, a possible nuclear war, are, or should be, unthinkable.