

March 14, 2014

One of our favorites, Craig Pirrong of Streetwise Professor, posted a piece highly critical of Putin. We have that here, and have rerun Paul Mirengoff's Power Line post from a few days ago about the alternate reality that *W* encountered when dealing with Putin. We follow those two posts with a Forbes article by Paul Roderick Gregory explaining the milieu from whence Putin sprang. Then Michael Barone writes about communication difficulties on our side.

To help understand Russian attitudes it is worth repeating a story in a book about the history of their conquest of Siberia. In 1905 the first leg of the Trans-Siberian Railway was completed to Irkutsk, the town at the bottom of Lake Baikal 3,200 miles from Moscow. Because the Czar's government was seriously in debt, (25% of the budget was going for interest payments. Was Obama the czar?) there was not enough in the budget to do a proper job. As a result, the grades were too steep, the curves were too sharp, and good hardwoods were not used for ties. Speeds were so slow, the trip to Irkutsk took two weeks. At the time, someone pointed out to a Russian man that trains in Western Europe were able to travel three times as fast. To which the Russian responded, "Well, if you need to get someplace sooner, you can just take an earlier train."

That confounding obliviousness is, to Pickerhead's experience, typical for the country. We get fooled by a very thin veneer of Russians who have a Western point of view. And more confusion comes from their excellence in Western idioms of music and literature. This leads us to believe they are just like us. They are not. Scratch below the surface and you will find a xenophobic peasant; notable only for a capacity for suffering we cannot even imagine. Smart though. Because everyone of them can speak Russian like a native.

This xenophobia, the fear of the foreign, is something Russians come by honestly and we would too if geography had dealt us their poor hand. It is a huge flat country with no natural barriers to entry, or invasion, for a thousand miles. Don't think of the Urals, they are like the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. The Volga provides an example. It rises in the Valdai Hills near Moscow and wanders for almost 4,000 miles before arriving at the Caspian Sea. A drop of less than 1,000 feet, or three inches every mile. As a consequence, the country was constantly tested from every direction and Russians came to value a strong government that would protect them.

Our political ancestors were on an island and learned to fear tyranny from inside the country. That's why we got the Magna Carta, and a government constrained by a constitution and the rule of law. Those things did not happen because we were wrapped in virtue at birth. Our peoples solved a different set of problems.

There is another Western, particularly American, conceit that annoys Russians. It happens at the beginning of every June as we celebrate the anniversary of the D-Day invasion when we landed in Europe and subsequently, supposedly, won the war. Dmitri Vologonov, a Red Army General who served on the staffs of both Gorbachev and Yeltsin, was an historian with unique access to archives of both the Red Army and the Communist Party. His best estimate of the number of Soviets killed in WWII is 27,000,000. The United States lost 300,000. Hitler had lost the war long before June 1944. We were there for the mopping up. Not to say our contribution in national treasure was not immense. But it was Russia that paid the butcher's bill.

Here's [Craig Pirrong](#) with his post after what he saw as a distressing Putin performance in his presser last week.

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So what are the broader implications of his disturbing display of mental imbalance? No doubt the Europeans are even more intimidated now, and will be all the more reluctant to challenge a leader with a nuclear arsenal that they view as mad.

And that raises another possibility: that Putin was playing the psycho for effect. The Slavic version of Nixon's Madman Theory, and which Machiavelli wrote about centuries earlier: he wrote that leaders can find it "a very wise thing to simulate madness."

I will say, watching the video, that Putin did a very, very credible impression of a madman, but that's necessary to make the gambit work, isn't it?

I don't know whether he's truly mad, or merely feigning it, but the effect will likely be the same. The disturbing display of mental imbalance will work to his favor, and lead the Europeans in particular to back away slowly, letting him keep his current conquests, and prepare for his next move. He may back off now, but he will be back for more. And quite possibly not just in Ukraine. But in the Baltic states and Poland.

And for reference, [Paul Mirengoff's](#) post on W's "discussions" with Putin.

As [John noted below](#), President Obama spent an hour and a half on the telephone with Vladimir Putin discussing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. What was the conversation like?

We can probably get a good sense of it by considering the [account](#) of President Bush's conversations with Putin set forth by Peter Baker in his excellent book about the Bush presidency, [Days of Fire](#).

It's well known that Bush and Putin got on well at first. But when the relationship soured, Bush became exasperated by his talks with the Russian bully.

Putin seemed to delight in debating Bush. But according to Baker, Bush hated debating Putin. "He's not well informed," Bush complained. "It's like arguing with an eighth grader with his facts wrong." Bush described another encounter as "like junior high debating."

One of Putin's tactics was to present absurd analogies between his abuses of power and events in the U.S., a tactic also favored by Nikita Khrushchev in Soviet times:

"You talk about Khodorkovsky [the head of Yukos whose assets and freedom were taken from him after he became a critic of Putin], and I talk about Enron," Putin told Bush. "You appoint the Electoral College and I appoint governors. What's the difference?"

At another point, Putin defended his control over media in Russia. "Don't lecture me about the free press," he said, "not after you fired that reporter."

"Vladimir, are you talking about Dan Rather?" Bush asked. Yes, replied Putin.

More along this vein from [Paul Roderick Gregory](#) writing in Forbes.

... After level-headed Angela Merkel of Germany talked by phone with Vladimir Putin on the Ukraine crisis, she came away reporting that he had lost touch with reality and was living in another world. Putin's saber-rattling press conference was another shocking introduction to Putin's parallel universe, in which black is white, down is up, and the sun rises at night.

In Putin's world, all demonstrators in Moscow streets are paid agents of Hillary Clinton, and now John Kerry, a student deserves two and a half years in jail for injuring a heavily-armored riot policeman with a lemon, the tiny Georgian army attacked Russian forces without provocation as rabid Georgians killed and maimed the embattled citizens of Abkhazia, the Maidan demonstrators are Nazis and skinheads who burn innocent bystanders alive, Yanukovich's Berkut riot police bravely held their ground as anti-Semitic snipers dropped them one by one, Yanukovich is the legitimate president although Ukraine has no president, the new Crimean governor (who last commanded a whopping 4% of the vote) has the unanimous support of the people, desperate Russian-speaking Ukrainians turned to Russia for humanitarian support, and the Russian uniforms worn by Crimean "local self defense forces" were purchased in second-hand stores.

Chancellor Merkel should not be surprised by Putin's lack of touch with reality, or that he is living "in another world." After all, she grew up behind a wall, erected by Putin's KGB heroes for the express purpose of keeping out "enemy provocateurs," not to keep the people from fleeing. The likes of John Kerry and Barack Obama, however, face Putin's KGB alternative universe for the first time. Let's hope they come to understand Putin's uncivilized provokatsia, desinformatsia, maskirovka, and the tried-and-true "big lie" as quickly as possible. ...

Michael Barone thinks presidential-sized personality defects lead our country into trouble.

Solipsism. It's a fancy word which means that you assume others see the world as you do and will behave as you would.

It's a quality often found in narcissists, people who greatly admire themselves — like a presidential candidate confident that he is a better speechwriter than his speechwriters, knows more about policy than his policy directors and is a better political director than his political director.

If that sounds familiar, it's a paraphrase of what President Obama told top political aide Patrick Gaspard in 2008, according to the New Yorker's Ryan Lizza.

More recently, Obama's solipsism has been painfully apparent as the United States suffers one reversal after another in world affairs. But it has been apparent ever since he started running for president in 2007.

Candidate Obama campaigned not just as a critic of the policies of the opposing party's president, as many candidates do. He portrayed himself repeatedly as someone who, because he "looks different" from other presidents, would make America beloved and cherished in the world.

Plenty of solipsism here. Obama's status as the possible and then actual first black president was surely an electoral asset. Most Americans believed and believe that, given the nation's history, the election of a black president would be a good thing, at least in the abstract.

But that history has less resonance beyond America's borders. Obama must have been surprised to find, on his trip to his father's native Africa, that he was less popular there than George W. Bush, thanks to Bush's program to combat AIDS. ...

Speaking of defects, **John Podhoretz** says the healthcare disaster is now undeniable. *The Washington Post* has the bombshell story of the month: "A pair of surveys released on Thursday suggest that just one in 10 uninsured people who qualify for private health plans through the new marketplace have signed up for one—and that about half of uninsured adults has looked for information on the online exchanges or plans to look." Well, and there goes the famed rationale for the health-care law—which was to bring the people, numbering anywhere between 31 million to 47 million depending on how and whom you count, without insurance into the system.

Why aren't they signing up? First off, there will always be people who choose to live on the margins in some way or other. They don't want to be in the system, they're paranoid about the system, they keep their money in their mattress and lots of cans in the basement. But mostly, people aren't signing up now and haven't had health care before because of the cost: "Of people who are uninsured and do not intend to get a health plan through the marketplaces, the biggest factor is that they believe they could not afford one."

Since October 1 of last year, the coverage of the Obamacare disaster has centered on the technical catastrophe of the healthcare.gov and the transitional problems afflicting insurers, employers, and the insured alike—and more recently the administration's desperate efforts to delay the penalties and controls imposed by the law to limit the political fallout. It is safe to say,

though, that this is the worst possible news for Obama and his people. They have thrown the entire health-care system into unprecedented chaos for a population that is, it seems, staying as far away from it as possible. Little has been fixed; much has been made far worse; nothing makes sense; and good luck to the Democrats who have to defend their votes for this colossal cock-up in November.

Streetwise Professor

[Is Putin a Psychopath, or Does He Just Play One on TV?](#)

by Craig Pirrong

The consensus opinion after Putin's press conference earlier today is that he has lost his mind. It was rambling, angry, discursive, and at times just bizarre.

Of course all of the usual Putinisms were there. Most notably, blaming the West for everything in a stream of whataboutism. This was accented by claims that the Ukrainian opposition consists mainly of thugs and fascists; that Yanukovich was wrongly ousted and didn't order any violence against protestors; and that the opposition was very well trained and professional, having passed through training camps in the Baltics and Poland. (Take this as a very ominous warning, people.)

My dear colleague, look how well trained the people who operated in Kiev were. As we all know they were trained at special bases in neighbouring states: in Lithuania, Poland and in Ukraine itself too. They were trained by instructors for extended periods. They were divided into dozens and hundreds, their actions were coordinated, they had good communication systems. It was all like clockwork. Did you see them in action? They looked very professional, like special forces. Why do you think those in Crimea should be any worse?

Yes. Those evil Poles and Lithuanians, training crack troops to throw rocks and fashion catapults. Definitely far more lethal than camouflaged masked men toting AKs.

More broadly, Russia and Putin are always right: the West is always hypocritical and wrong.

Putin also denied the obvious, claiming that there are no Russian troops in Crimea, just local "self-defense forces" which he denies were trained by Russia.

In other words, there is no agreement on the basic facts of the situation, meaning that any attempt at negotiation with him, either by the Ukrainian government or the West, is doomed to failure. He rejects the legitimacy of the protests, views the outcome as a fascist coup arranged by the West, and denies that Russia is directly involved in the occupation of Crimea.

These were the substantive elements of insanity (paranoia, specifically) of the conference. But Putin added various asides that illustrated a man that feels no need to self-censor, but is so convinced of his own brilliance that anything that crosses his mind should be shared with the world. These "thoughts" were truly bizarre and mendacious, and even more suggestive of madness.

For instance, when discussing the alleged self-defense forces in Crimea, Putin claimed they were just kitted out in store-bought gear:

QUESTION: Mr President, a clarification if I may. The people who were blocking the Ukrainian Army units in Crimea were wearing uniforms that strongly resembled the Russian Army uniform. Were those Russian soldiers, Russian military?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: Why don't you take a look at the post-Soviet states. There are many uniforms there that are similar. You can go to a store and buy any kind of uniform.

They must have some *awesome* Army-Navy stores in the FSU: not only can you get up to date cammo, you can also pick up the latest AKs and military trucks.

Then he went on to criticize the massive corruption and social stratification in Ukraine, but denied there was anything comparable in Russia:

Corruption has reached dimensions that are unheard of here in Russia. Accumulation of wealth and social stratification – problems that are also acute in this country – are much worse in Ukraine, radically worse. Out there, they are beyond anything we can imagine imagination. Generally, people wanted change, but one should not support illegal change.

Words fail.

In the same breath, he gave a Ukrainian history lesson:

In my opinion, this revolutionary situation has been brewing for a long time, since the first days of Ukraine's independence. The ordinary Ukrainian citizen, the ordinary guy suffered during the rule of Nicholas II, during the reign of Kuchma, and Yushchenko, and Yanukovych.

Ordinary Ukrainians guys suffered under Nicholas II, Kuchma, Yushchenko, Yanukovich. Anybody notice a name missing from that list? Stalin, maybe? (Lenin should get honorable mention too.)

The guy who killed one-third of the Ukrainian population via starvation and executions, a total of around 3-8 million people? Think there was a little suffering in 1932-1933? As bad as Yanukovych was, his total body count during the uprising is on the order of the body count every 6 minutes at the height of the Holodomor.

This omission is particularly disgusting given the immense psychological toll that the Holodomor took and continues to take on Ukrainians. Don't think that the omission will not resonate deeply in Ukraine. It is a taunting reminder of how Russians deny, deny, deny the Holodomor, and get incensed-hysterical, actually-at any moral claim made against them by Ukrainians.

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Put it altogether, and Putin gives the impression of approaching Kim Jung Un or Kim Jung Il levels of aggressive craziness. (And for those who say these exercises and tests were planned in advance, they could have easily been canceled if Putin wanted to lower the tension level. The fact he let them proceed tells you all you need to know about his intent and mindset.)

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Power Line

[What was that Obama-Putin conversation like?](#)

by Paul Mirengoff

As [John noted below](#), President Obama spent an hour and a half on the telephone with Vladimir Putin discussing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. What was the conversation like?

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At another point, Putin defended his control over media in Russia. "Don't lecture me about the free press," he said, "not after you fired that reporter."

"Vladimir, are you talking about Dan Rather?" Bush asked. Yes, replied Putin.

Bush explained to Putin that he had nothing to do with Rather losing his job. "I strongly suggest you not say that in public," he added. "The American people will think you don't understand our system."

Putin's ridiculous arguments were even harder to stomach because they were presented stridently and sarcastically by Putin's interpreter. After one session, Bush told Tony Blair:

I sat there for an hour and forty-five minutes or an hour and forty minutes, and it went on and on. At one point, the interpreter made me so mad that I nearly reached over the table and slapped the hell out of the guy. He had a mocking tone, making accusations about America. He was just sarcastic.

This may have represented displacement of the anger Bush felt towards Putin.

In all likelihood, Putin gave Obama the same kind of treatment when they discussed Ukraine. Even "Mr. Words" Obama, who fancies himself an ace debater and has been known to use a "junior high" trick or two, must have tired of it pretty quickly.

No patriotic American should wish an hour and a half talk with Vladimir Putin on any American president. Let's hope at least that Putin used a different interpreter.

JOHN adds: I am not sure any patriotic American would want an hour and a half talk with Barack Obama, either, but I will let it go. In this context, for better or worse, Barack is our guy. Sadly.

Forbes

[Putin Hasn't Lost Touch With 'His' Reality. Welcome To KGB Russia](#)

by Paul Roderick Gregory

On Christmas Day 1979, U.S. intelligence detected waves of Soviet military aircraft flying into Afghanistan. The next day, President Carter received a memo from his national security advisor outlining possible responses to a wide scale Soviet intervention. On the night of December 27, Soviet KGB troops dressed in Afghan uniforms attacked the palace where Afghan President Amin was hiding, executed him, and occupied strategic locations throughout Kabul in a forty-five minute operation. A radio broadcast, purporting to be from Kabul but actually coming from Uzbekistan, announced that Amin's execution had been ordered by the Afghan Peoples' Revolutionary Council and that a new government headed by Soviet-loyalist Babrak Karmal had been formed. Soviet ground forces and paratroopers invaded the same evening, and, within five weeks, five divisions were in place. So began the Soviet Afghanistan war. (Paul Gregory, [The Soviet Quagmire](#)).

Vladimir Putin, then an ambitious 27-year-old foreign intelligence officer of the KGB, cut his teeth on the KGB Afghanistan invasion. In his fourteen years as Russia's supreme leader, he has used the classic KGB dirty tricks of *provokatsia*, *desinformatsia*, and *maskirovka* to bomb Chechnya back to the stone age while installing a puppet regime, intimidate and keep in line Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Central Asia, and any independence-minded flash points of the former Soviet empire. Ukraine, his latest victim, is, in Putin's world, the beneficiary of munificent Russian humanitarian assistance necessitated by manipulation of the sinister Americans applying techniques on the Ukrainian people perfected on lab rats.

Putin's unchanging KGB script dates back to Stalin's annihilations and deportation of whole nationalities in the 1930s and State Security head, Ivan Serov's, razing of Eastern Europe. The model remains the same: Armored trucks and troops arrive out of nowhere, invited by some shadowy local organization. They take control of strategic facilities and communications, and announce a new regime elected by popular acclaim and cheered on by grateful residents organized by KGB operatives.

The world clearly understands that Russian forces have launched an illegitimate and disguised invasion of a sovereign nation, in violation of international treaties bearing their own signature. They have installed a puppet government, and have gone about securing control of foreign territory, the limits of which remain to be determined.

After level-headed [Angela Merkel](#) of Germany talked by phone with Vladimir Putin on the Ukraine crisis, she came away reporting that he had lost touch with reality and was living in another world. Putin's saber-rattling press conference was another shocking introduction to Putin's parallel universe, in which black is white, down is up, and the sun rises at night.

In Putin's world, all demonstrators in Moscow streets are paid agents of Hillary Clinton, and now John Kerry, a student deserves two and a half years in jail for injuring a heavily-armored riot policeman with a lemon, the tiny Georgian army attacked Russian forces without provocation as rabid Georgians killed and maimed the embattled citizens of Abkhazia, the Maidan demonstrators are Nazis and skinheads who burn innocent bystanders alive, Yanukovich's Berkut riot police bravely held their ground as anti-Semitic snipers dropped them one by one, Yanukovich is the legitimate president although Ukraine has no president, the new Crimean governor (who last commanded a whopping 4% of the vote) has the unanimous support of the people, desperate Russian-speaking Ukrainians turned to Russia for humanitarian support, and the Russian uniforms worn by Crimean "local self defense forces" were purchased in second-hand stores.

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Know thy enemy. If he is in the gutter, you'll need to get your hands dirty.

The author serves on the International Academic Advisory Board of the Kiev School of Economics. The views are those of the author and not the school.

English Russia had this picture of a forlorn abandoned church.

Is this a metaphor for people who have lost their faith in the future?



Examiner

Obama's mistaken belief that others see the world as he sees it

by Michael Barone

Solipsism. It's a fancy word which means that you assume others see the world as you do and will behave as you would.

It's a quality often found in narcissists, people who greatly admire themselves — like a presidential candidate confident that he is a better speechwriter than his speechwriters, knows more about policy than his policy directors and is a better political director than his political director.

If that sounds familiar, it's a paraphrase of what [President Obama](#) told top political aide Patrick Gaspard in 2008, [according to the New Yorker's Ryan Lizza](#).

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Candidate Obama campaigned not just as a critic of the policies of the opposing party's president, as many candidates do. He portrayed himself repeatedly as someone who, because he "looks different" from other presidents, would make America beloved and cherished in the world.

Plenty of solipsism here. Obama's status as the possible and then actual first black president was surely an electoral asset. Most Americans believed and believe that, given the nation's history, the election of a black president would be a good thing, at least in the abstract.

But that history has less resonance beyond America's borders. Obama must have been surprised to find, on his trip to his father's native Africa, that he was less popular there than [George W. Bush](#), thanks to Bush's program to combat AIDS.

Obama was also mistaken in thinking that his election and the departure of the cowboy bully Bush would make the United States popular again among the world's leaders and peoples — though it had that effect in the faculty lounges and university neighborhoods Obama had chosen to inhabit.

In the wider world, the United States, as the largest and mightiest power, is bound to be resented and blamed for every unwelcome development. American presidents for more than a century have been characterized as crude and bumptious by foreign elites.

Moreover, as [Robert Gates](#) argued persuasively in his [1996](#) and [2014 memoirs](#), there is more continuity in American foreign policy than domestic campaign rhetoric suggests. From Guantanamo to [Afghanistan](#), Obama found himself obliged more to carry on than to repudiate Bush's policies.

Where he has clearly changed course, he has done so solipsistically. A reset with [Russia](#) was possible, he reasoned, because [Vladimir Putin](#), insulted by Bush's mulishness, was ready to cooperate with a president in mutually advantageous win-win agreements.

So in the past week, Obama has insisted that Putin's invasion of [Ukraine's Crimea](#) was not in his own interest. No doubt most in the faculty lounge would see it that way. But Putin clearly doesn't. As the military say, the enemy has a vote.

And in his astonishing interview last week with Bloomberg's Jeffrey Goldberg, Obama declared that Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas was ready to accept peace with Israel. Again, that's what Obama and the faculty lounge would do. But Abbas has turned down one generous peace deal and has never said he would recognize Israel as a Jewish state.

Obama's assumption that other leaders share his views has its limits. It does not always apply to those who have been allies and friends of the United States.

In the Goldberg interview, he lashed Israel and by implication Benjamin Netanyahu for "aggressive settlement construction" in the West Bank. The implication is that only Israel is blocking a peace agreement. But it was Abbas who has rejected [John Kerry's](#) framework.

Obama's solipsism extends even to the mullahs of [Iran](#). This goes back again to the 2008 campaign: The problem was Bush's refusal to negotiate. Speak emolliently, send greetings on Muslim holidays and ignore the Green Movement protesters, and Iranian leaders would see that it is in their interest to halt their nuclear weapons program.

Most Americans, conservative as well as liberal, would be delighted if Putin, the Palestinians and Ayatollah Khamenei believed and behaved as we would. They would be pleased to see an enlightened American leader bridge rhetorical differences and reach accommodations that left all sides content and at peace.

That, unhappily, is not the world we live in. Being on the lookout for common ground is sensible. Assuming common ground when none exists is foolish. And often has bad consequences.

Contentions

[The Obamacare Disaster Is Now Undeniable](#)

by John Podhoretz

The *Washington Post* has [the bombshell story of the month](#): "A pair of surveys released on Thursday suggest that just one in 10 uninsured people who qualify for private health plans through the new marketplace have signed up for one—and that about half of uninsured adults has looked for information on the online exchanges or plans to look." Well, and there goes the famed rationale for the health-care law—which was to bring the people, numbering anywhere between 31 million to 47 million depending on how and whom you count, without insurance into the system.

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WHAT THE WORLD SEES



Barack vacationed in the Keys, Vladimir in Crimea

