

April 5, 2017 – PUTIN

Hillsdale College's Imprimis has a great issue this month on "how to think about Putin." It is a transcript of a talk by Christopher Caldwell at the College's Leadership Seminar held in Phoenix two months ago.

... Let me stress at the outset that this is not going to be a talk about what to think about Putin, which is something you are all capable of making up your minds on, but rather how to think about him. And on this, there is one basic truth to remember, although it is often forgotten. Our globalist leaders may have deprecated sovereignty since the end of the Cold War, but that does not mean it has ceased for an instant to be the primary subject of politics. ...

While Caldwell doesn't address this directly, his efforts contain a realization of the problems of geography that have dogged Russia throughout its history. To wit, this is a country which is situated on the Great Northern European Plain which stretches from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains and which has provided the country with no natural barriers that could constitute a defensive position.

... if we were to use traditional measures for understanding leaders, which involve the defense of borders and national flourishing, Putin would count as the pre-eminent statesman of our time. On the world stage, who can vie with him? Only perhaps Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey.

When Putin took power in the winter of 1999-2000, his country was defenseless. It was bankrupt. It was being carved up by its new kleptocratic elites, in collusion with its old imperial rivals, the Americans. Putin changed that. In the first decade of this century, he did what Kemal Atatürk had done in Turkey in the 1920s. Out of a crumbling empire, he rescued a nation-state, and gave it coherence and purpose. He disciplined his country's plutocrats. He restored its military strength. And he refused, with ever blunter rhetoric, to accept for Russia a subservient role in an American-run world system drawn up by foreign politicians and business leaders. His voters credit him with having saved his country. ...

Wikipedia lists 156 wars that have involved Russia since the fledgling Kievan State began to take shape in 830. That means every seven and a half years during the history of Russia there has been some type of armed conflict; mostly with immediate neighbors. There were 21 wars with Turkey or Byzantium, ten with Sweden, seventeen with Poland, and so on. Is it any wonder Russians value a strong central state?

Our political and philosophical forbearers had different concerns because they inhabited more secure lands with effective barriers against invasion. Great Britain was safe enough to have given much more thought to controlling a strong central state. So the Magna Carta, placing limits on the power of the rulers was created in England. It is impossible to imagine such a document making an appearance in Russia which faced existential threats every decade.

... Putin did not come out of nowhere. Russian people not only tolerate him, they revere him. You can get a better idea of why he has ruled for 17 years if you remember that, within a few years of Communism's fall, average life expectancy in Russia had fallen below that of Bangladesh. That is an ignominy that falls on Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin's reckless opportunism made him an indispensable foe of Communism in the late 1980s. But it made him an inadequate founding father for a modern state. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose writings about Communism

give him some claim to be considered the greatest man of the twentieth century, believed the post-Communist leaders had made the country even worse. In the year 2000 Solzhenitsyn wrote: "As a result of the Yeltsin era, all the fundamental sectors of our political, economic, cultural, and moral life have been destroyed or looted. Will we continue looting and destroying Russia until nothing is left?" That was the year Putin came to power. He was the answer to Solzhenitsyn's question.

There are two things Putin did that cemented the loyalty of Solzhenitsyn and other Russians—he restrained the billionaires who were looting the country, and he restored Russia's standing abroad. Let us take them in turn. ...

When last we posted, we closed with an article on the great tragedy that took place in 100 years ago in Russian when the fledgling democratic government was overthrown by Lenin and his bloodthirsty leftists. The circumstances of Lenin arriving in St' Petersburg one month after the czar abdicated are the subject of a [book reviewed by The WSJ](#).

Of all the weapons deployed in World War I, among the most lethal may have been a train that left Zurich on April 9, 1917. Thirty-two of its passengers—a ragbag of revolutionaries and their family members—were on their way to Russia. At their head was Vladimir Lenin. The czar had just been overthrown, and a new democracy was struggling to be born. But the change in government was less of a revolution than Lenin had in mind. He had been in exile for years, most recently in Switzerland. To put things right, he had to return home.

Switzerland and Russia are not exactly neighbors. Much of the territory lying between them was controlled by states with which Russia was at war, states that wouldn't be expected to offer free passage to someone who was not only an enemy national but also an individual dedicated to the destruction of their own social systems.

Lenin, however, had cut a deal with the kaiser's Germany. In "Lenin on the Train," Catherine Merridale, a distinguished historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, describes Lenin's journey, the reasons it came about and the events it set in motion. Berlin had realized, she tells us, that supporting foreign insurgents could help destabilize Germany's enemies from within. With democratic Russia set on continuing the war Lenin opposed, it seemed sensible to transport the veteran revolutionary like (in Winston Churchill's words) a "plague bacillus" in a "sealed truck" and release him to infect his fragile homeland. And so on that April day began a ride across Europe that led, within months, to catastrophe and, over time, to the loss of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, then millions, of lives. ...

Rounding out today's post on Russian subjects, Craig Pirrong reacts to the Susan Rice news of the past few days.

Some 200 theaters around the world are screening 1984 to warn about the dark descending night of fascism under Donald Trump. The timing of this could not be more ironic, given that all the news of late makes it abundantly clear that the former administration, not the current one, deserves to be known as Big Brother.

In particular, after a steady trickle of news about surveillance and unmasking of Trump campaign and transition personnel by the US intelligence community, yesterday the story broke that ex-National Security Advisor and noted f-bomber Susan Rice—yes, that paragon of honesty, Madam Benghazi Talking Points—had requested the unmasking of numerous Trump personnel picked up in reports of surveillance on foreigners (incidentally, of course! Trust them on this!).*

Last month, Ms. Rice played dumb (not a stretch!) by claiming that she had no idea what Devin Nunes was on about. Yesterday, Susie F was unavailable for comment, although one of the Obama creatures working for CNN (but I repeat myself) tweeted: “Just in: ‘The idea that Ambassador Rice improperly sought the identities of Americans is false.’ – person close to Rice tells me.”

Note the presence of the weasel modifier “improperly.” Not a categorical denial of unmasking. I therefore consider this an admission that unmasking did occur. ...

Nice group of cartoons today.





Hillsdale College - Imprimis
[How to Think About Vladimir Putin](#)
 by Christopher Caldwell

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on February 15, 2017, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Phoenix, Arizona.

Vladimir Putin is a powerful ideological symbol and a highly effective ideological litmus test. He is a hero to populist conservatives around the world and anathema to progressives. I don't want to compare him to our own president, but if you know enough about what a given American thinks of Putin, you can probably tell what he thinks of Donald Trump.

Let me stress at the outset that this is not going to be a talk about *what* to think about Putin, which is something you are all capable of making up your minds on, but rather *how* to think about him. And on this, there is one basic truth to remember, although it is often forgotten. Our

globalist leaders may have deprecated sovereignty since the end of the Cold War, but that does not mean it has ceased for an instant to be the primary subject of politics.

Vladimir Vladimirovich is not the president of a feminist NGO. He is not a transgender-rights activist. He is not an ombudsman appointed by the United Nations to make and deliver slide shows about green energy. He is the elected leader of Russia—a rugged, relatively poor, militarily powerful country that in recent years has been frequently humiliated, robbed, and misled. His job has been to protect his country's prerogatives and its sovereignty in an international system that seeks to erode sovereignty in general and views Russia's sovereignty in particular as a threat.

By American standards, Putin's respect for the democratic process has been fitful at best. He has cracked down on peaceful demonstrations. Political opponents have been arrested and jailed throughout his rule. Some have even been murdered—Anna Politkovskaya, the crusading Chechnya correspondent shot in her apartment building in Moscow in 2006; Alexander Litvinenko, the spy poisoned with polonium-210 in London months later; the activist Boris Nemtsov, shot on a bridge in Moscow in early 2015. While the evidence connecting Putin's own circle to the killings is circumstantial, it merits scrutiny.

Yet if we were to use *traditional* measures for understanding leaders, which involve the defense of borders and national flourishing, Putin would count as the pre-eminent statesman of our time. On the world stage, who can vie with him? Only perhaps Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey.

When Putin took power in the winter of 1999-2000, his country was defenseless. It was bankrupt. It was being carved up by its new kleptocratic elites, in collusion with its old imperial rivals, the Americans. Putin changed that. In the first decade of this century, he did what Kemal Atatürk had done in Turkey in the 1920s. Out of a crumbling empire, he rescued a nation-state, and gave it coherence and purpose. He disciplined his country's plutocrats. He restored its military strength. And he refused, with ever blunter rhetoric, to accept for Russia a subservient role in an American-run world system drawn up by foreign politicians and business leaders. His voters credit him with having saved his country.

Why are American intellectuals such ideologues when they talk about the "international system"? Probably because American intellectuals devised that system, and because they assume there can never be legitimate historic reasons why a politician would arise in opposition to it. They denied such reasons for the rise of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines. They do the same with Donald Trump. And they have done it with Putin. They assume he rose out of the KGB with the sole purpose of embodying an evil for our righteous leaders to stamp out.

Putin did not come out of nowhere. Russian people not only tolerate him, they revere him. You can get a better idea of why he has ruled for 17 years if you remember that, within a few years of Communism's fall, average life expectancy in Russia had fallen below that of Bangladesh. That is an ignominy that falls on Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin's reckless opportunism made him an indispensable foe of Communism in the late 1980s. But it made him an inadequate founding father for a modern state. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, whose writings about Communism give him some claim to be considered the greatest man of the twentieth century, believed the post-Communist leaders had made the country even worse. In the year 2000 Solzhenitsyn wrote: "As a result of the Yeltsin era, all the fundamental sectors of our political, economic, cultural, and moral life have been destroyed or looted. Will we continue looting and destroying Russia until

nothing is left?" That was the year Putin came to power. He was the answer to Solzhenitsyn's question.

There are two things Putin did that cemented the loyalty of Solzhenitsyn and other Russians—he restrained the billionaires who were looting the country, and he restored Russia's standing abroad. Let us take them in turn.

Russia retains elements of a kleptocracy based on oligarchic control of natural resources. But we must remember that Putin inherited that kleptocracy. He did not found it. The transfer of Russia's natural resources into the hands of KGB-connected Communists, who called themselves businessmen, was a tragic moment for Russia. It was also a shameful one for the West. Western political scientists provided the theft with ideological cover, presenting it as a "transition to capitalism." Western corporations, including banks, provided the financing.

Let me stress the point. The oligarchs who turned Russia into an armed plutocracy within half a decade of the downfall in 1991 of Communism called themselves capitalists. But they were mostly men who had been groomed as the next generation of Communist *nomenklatura*—people like Boris Berezovsky, Vladimir Gusinsky, and Mikhail Khodorkovsky. They were the people who understood the scope and nature of state assets, and they controlled the privatization programs. They had access to Western financing and they were willing to use violence and intimidation. So they took power just as they had planned to back when they were in Communist cadre school—but now as owners, not as bureaucrats. Since the state had owned *everything* under Communism, this was quite a payout. Yeltsin's reign was built on these billionaires' fortunes, and vice-versa.

Khodorkovsky has recently become a symbol of Putin's misrule, because Putin jailed him for ten years. Khodorkovsky's trial certainly didn't meet Western standards. But Khodorkovsky's was among the most obscene privatizations of all. In his recent biography of Putin, Steven Lee Myers, the former Moscow correspondent for the *New York Times*, calculates that Khodorkovsky and fellow investors paid \$150 million in the 1990s for the main production unit of the oil company Yukos, which came to be valued at about \$20 billion by 2004. In other words, they acquired a share of the essential commodity of Russia—its oil—for less than one percent of its value. Putin came to call these people "state-appointed billionaires." He saw them as a conduit for looting Russia, and sought to restore to the country what had been stolen from it. He also saw that Russia needed to reclaim control of its vast reserves of oil and gas, on which much of Europe depended, because that was the only geopolitical lever it had left.

The other thing Putin did was restore the country's position abroad. He arrived in power a decade after his country had suffered a Vietnam-like defeat in Afghanistan. Following that defeat, it had failed to halt a bloody Islamist uprising in Chechnya. And worst of all, it had been humiliated by the United States and NATO in the Serbian war of 1999, when the Clinton administration backed a nationalist and Islamist independence movement in Kosovo. This was the last war in which the United States would fight on the same side as Osama Bin Laden, and the U.S. used the opportunity to show Russia its lowly place in the international order, treating it as a nuisance and an afterthought. Putin became president a half a year after Yeltsin was maneuvered into allowing the dismemberment of Russia's ally, Serbia, and as he entered office Putin said: "We will not tolerate any humiliation to the national pride of Russians, or any threat to the integrity of the country."

The degradation of Russia's position represented by the Serbian War is what Putin was alluding to when he famously described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century." This statement is often misunderstood or mischaracterized: he did

not mean by it any desire to return to Communism. But when Putin said he'd restore Russia's strength, he meant it. He beat back the military advance of Islamist armies in Chechnya and Dagestan, and he took a hard line on terrorism—including a decision not to negotiate with hostage-takers, even in secret.

One theme runs through Russian foreign policy, and has for much of its history. There is no country, with the exception of Israel, that has a more dangerous frontier with the Islamic world. You would think that this would be the primary lens through which to view Russian conduct—a good place for the West to begin in trying to explain Russian behavior that, at first glance, does not have an obvious rationale. Yet agitation against Putin in the West has not focused on that at all. It has not focused on Russia's intervention against ISIS in the war in Syria, or even on Russia's harboring Edward Snowden, the fugitive leaker of U.S. intelligence secrets.

The two episodes of concerted outrage about Putin among Western progressives have both involved issues trivial to the world, but vital to the world of progressivism. The first came in 2014, when the Winter Olympics, which were to be held in Sochi, presented an opportunity to damage Russia economically. Most world leaders attended the games happily, from Mark Rutte (Netherlands) and Enrico Letta (Italy) to Xi Jinping (China) and Shinzo Abe (Japan). But three leaders—David Cameron of Britain, François Hollande of France, and Barack Obama of the United States—sent progressives in their respective countries into a frenzy over a short list of *domestic* causes. First, there was the jailed oil tycoon, Khodorkovsky; Putin released him before the Olympics began. Second, there were the young women who called themselves Pussy Riot, performance artists who were jailed for violating Russia's blasphemy laws when they disrupted a religious service with obscene chants about God (translations were almost never shown on Western television); Putin also released them prior to the Olympics. Third, there was Russia's Article 6.21, which was oddly described in the American press as a law against “so-called gay propaganda.” A more accurate translation of what the law forbids is promoting “non-traditional sexual relations to children.” Now, some Americans might wish that Russia took religion or homosexuality less seriously and still be struck by the fact that these are very local issues. There is something unbalanced about turning them into diplomatic incidents and issuing all kinds of threats because of them.

The second campaign against Putin has been the attempt by the outgoing Obama administration to cast doubt on the legitimacy of last November's presidential election by implying that the Russian government somehow “hacked” it. This is an extraordinary episode in the history of manufacturing opinion. I certainly will not claim any independent expertise in cyber-espionage. But anyone who has read the public documentation on which the claims rest will find only speculation, arguments from authority, and attempts to make repetition do the work of logic.

In mid-December, the *New York Times* ran an article entitled “How Moscow Aimed a Perfect Weapon at the U.S. Election.” Most of the assertions in the piece came from unnamed administration sources and employees of CrowdStrike, the cybersecurity firm hired by the Democrats to investigate a hacked computer at the Democratic National Committee. They quote those who served on the DNC's secret anti-hacking committee, including the party chairwoman, Debbie Wasserman Schultz, and the party lawyer, Michael Sussmann. Then a National Intelligence Council report that the government released in January showed the heart of the case: more than half of the report was devoted to complaints about the bias of RT, the Russian government's international television network.

Again, we do not know what the intelligence agencies know. But there is no publicly available evidence to justify Arizona Senator John McCain's calling what the Russians did "an act of war." If there were, the discussion of the evidence would have continued into the Trump administration, rather than simply evaporating once it ceased to be useful as a political tool.

There were two other imaginary Putin scandals that proved to be nothing. In November, the *Washington Post* ran a blacklist of news organizations that had published "fake news" in the service of Putin, but the list turned out to have been compiled largely by a fly-by-night political activist group called PropOrNot, which had placed certain outlets on the list only because their views coincided with those of RT on given issues. Then in December, the Obama administration claimed to have found Russian computer code it melodramatically called "Grizzly Steppe" in the Vermont electrical grid. This made front-page headlines. But it was a mistake. The so-called Russian code could be bought commercially, and it was found, according to one journalist, "in a single laptop that *was not connected to the electric grid.*"

Democrats have gone to extraordinary lengths to discredit Putin. Why? There really is such a thing as a *Zeitgeist* or spirit of the times. A given issue will become a passion for all mankind, and certain men will stand as symbols of it. Half a century ago, for instance, the *Zeitgeist* was about colonial liberation. Think of Martin Luther King, traveling to Norway to collect his Nobel Peace Prize, stopping on the way in London to give a talk about South African apartheid. What did that have to do with him? Practically: Nothing. Symbolically: Everything. It was an opportunity to talk about the moral question of the day.

We have a different *Zeitgeist* today. Today it is sovereignty and self-determination that are driving passions in the West. The reason for this has a great deal to do with the way the Cold War conflict between the United States and Russia ended. In the 1980s, the two countries were great powers, yes; but at the same time they were constrained. The alliances they led were fractious. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, their fates diverged. The United States was offered the chance to lay out the rules of the world system, and accepted the offer with a vengeance. Russia was offered the role of submitting to that system.

Just how irreconcilable those roles are is seen in Russia's conflict with Ukraine two years ago. According to the official United States account, Russia invaded its neighbor after a glorious revolution threw out a plutocracy. Russia then annexed Ukrainian naval bases in the Crimea. According to the Russian view, Ukraine's democratically elected government was overthrown by an armed uprising backed by the United States. To prevent a hostile NATO from establishing its own naval base in the Black Sea, by this account, Russia *had* to take Crimea, which in any case is historically Russian territory. Both of these accounts are perfectly correct. It is just that one word can mean something different to Americans than it does to Russians. For instance, we say the Russians don't believe in democracy. But as the great journalist and historian Walter Laqueur put it, "Most Russians have come to believe that democracy is what happened in their country between 1990 and 2000, and they do not want any more of it."

The point with which I would like to conclude is this: we will get nowhere if we assume that Putin sees the world as we do. One of the more independent thinkers about Russia in Washington, D.C., is the Reaganite California congressman Dana Rohrabacher. I recall seeing him scolded at a dinner in Washington a few years ago. A fellow guest told him he should be ashamed, because Reagan would have idealistically stood up to Putin on human rights. Rohrabacher disagreed. Reagan's gift as a foreign policy thinker, he said, was not his idealism. It was his

ability to set priorities, to see what constituted the biggest threat. Today's biggest threat to the U.S. isn't Vladimir Putin.

So why are people thinking about Putin as much as they do? Because he has become a symbol of national self-determination. Populist conservatives see him the way progressives once saw Fidel Castro, as the one person who says he won't submit to the world that surrounds him. You didn't have to be a Communist to appreciate the way Castro, whatever his excesses, was carving out a space of autonomy for his country.

In the same way, Putin's conduct is bound to win sympathy even from some of Russia's enemies, the ones who feel the international system is not delivering for them. Generally, if you like that system, you will consider Vladimir Putin a menace. If you don't like it, you will have some sympathy for him. Putin has become a symbol of national sovereignty in its battle with globalism. That turns out to be the big battle of our times. As our last election shows, that's true even here.

Christopher Caldwell is a senior editor at The Weekly Standard. A graduate of Harvard College, his essays, columns, and reviews appear in the Claremont Review of Books, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times Book Review, the Spectator (London), Financial Times, and numerous other publications. He is the author of Reflections on the Revolution in Europe: Immigration, Islam, and the West, and is at work on a book about post-1960s America.

WSJ

The Wheels of Revolution

Andrew Stuttaford reviews "Lenin on the Train" by Catherine Merridale.

Of all the weapons deployed in World War I, among the most lethal may have been a train that left Zurich on April 9, 1917. Thirty-two of its passengers—a ragbag of revolutionaries and their family members—were on their way to Russia. At their head was Vladimir Lenin. The czar had just been overthrown, and a new democracy was struggling to be born. But the change in government was less of a revolution than Lenin had in mind. He had been in exile for years, most recently in Switzerland. To put things right, he had to return home.

Switzerland and Russia are not exactly neighbors. Much of the territory lying between them was controlled by states with which Russia was at war, states that wouldn't be expected to offer free passage to someone who was not only an enemy national but also an individual dedicated to the destruction of their own social systems.

LENIN ON THE TRAIN

By Catherine Merridale

Metropolitan, 353 pages, \$30

Lenin, however, had cut a deal with the kaiser's Germany. In "Lenin on the Train," Catherine Merridale, a distinguished historian of Russia and the Soviet Union, describes Lenin's journey,

the reasons it came about and the events it set in motion. Berlin had realized, she tells us, that supporting foreign insurgents could help destabilize Germany's enemies from within. With democratic Russia set on continuing the war Lenin opposed, it seemed sensible to transport the veteran revolutionary like (in Winston Churchill's words) a "plague bacillus" in a "sealed truck" and release him to infect his fragile homeland. And so on that April day began a ride across Europe that led, within months, to catastrophe and, over time, to the loss of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, then millions, of lives.

Ms. Merridale uses the journey as the centerpiece of a broader account of the fall of czarism and the mounting Bolshevik pressure on the government that replaced it, but she does not neglect the details of that time on the rails. She retraces Lenin's route from Switzerland through Germany to neutral Sweden up to Lapland and the frontier with what was still Russian-ruled Finland, then onto Russia proper and arrival at Petrograd. A vivid writer, Ms. Merridale depicts the watchful supervision by wary German hosts, as well as Lenin's bossiness—smoking restrictions, mandated sleeping periods, less noise please, enough already with the "Marseillaise"—a tiny hint of totalitarian discipline to come. But in those days, there was still room for dissent: "As the last of the sandwiches was finished, everyone else was reduced to whispering, fidgeting and stifling their giggles."

The revolutionaries' railway carriage was uncomfortable—ostentatiously ascetic, they had opted for cheap seats—and although theirs was not really a "sealed" train, they were kept as far apart as possible from the locals as they traveled through Germany: The authorities in Berlin did not want to risk friendly encounters, even though one did take place between the Reds, parked for one night on a railway siding in Frankfurt, and German soldiers eager to know the prospects for peace.

The border crossing between Haparanda, Sweden, and Tornio, Finland, fits neatly into the world Ms. Merridale re-creates so evocatively in this book, a world of spies, secret policemen, conspiracies, dirty money and disorder: "A lively trade in smuggled war-related goods already flourished in these forests; a fog that could hide heavy crates could certainly make people disappear. There were plenty of strangers about, too, the kind whom no one could identify."

Today Haparanda is tranquil, a small, remote town in Sweden's northern reaches, but in 1917 it was the only safe European "land bridge" into Russia for its allies. It was so flooded with goods—an "archipelago of containers and sacks," writes Ms. Merridale—that its customs house (which handled "twenty-seven million mail items and packets" in just six months of 1917) was overrun. Meanwhile, British officer Harold Gruner, known as "the Spy" to his colleagues, was waiting in Tornio and set about interrogating the Russians when they arrived. He had been sent by the British as a junior adviser to help out their Russian allies and, of course, to gather intelligence.

London was aware of how destructive Lenin could be to the Russian war effort and knew that a Russian collapse would, by freeing up large numbers of German troops, pose a major threat on the Western Front. But the Brit was no Bond. His efforts to delay Lenin were confined to questioning and a strip search. With the new Russia touchingly, if naïvely, unwilling to refuse entry to any of its citizens, however dangerous, delay was all that was possible. Lenin was allowed into Finland, cheered into Russia and, on the evening of April 16, the train drew into Petrograd's Finland Station beneath hastily erected triumphal arches and was greeted by a vast crowd of people, few of whom could have grasped what the returning hero had in mind for them: "[Lenin's] eyes took in the scarlet banners, station lights . . . and the flashing brass of cornets and trombones. Somewhere in this unexpected human sea, a guard of honour from the Second Baltic Fleet had just presented arms. In their blue uniforms and jaunty caps, the lads looked like

hangovers from the old empire. Lenin was irritated by the show, which reeked of bourgeois pageantry and pride."

Sometimes Ms. Merridale gives the impression of being overwhelmed by the force of Lenin's personality. Staring out of a modern train window as she follows Lenin's trail, she reflects that "a hundred years have passed since the great Russian came this way," a curious description of a man who did so much to devastate the homeland for which he held little patriotic affection and who can only be considered great if that word is stripped of all moral meaning.

Ms. Merridale understands the violence that not only ran through Lenin's vision but was integral to it—a violence that, for all her discussion of the hopes he conjured up, was apparent to many of those watching the Bolsheviks with growing dread in the summer of 1917. She draws the necessary contrast between the sanctified Lenin of Soviet mythology and the "mass murderer" that he was, even if she vacillates over the number of killings for which he was responsible in his own lifetime. On two occasions she maintains that the toll ran into the "tens of thousands"—an extreme underestimate, echoed by her calculation that, in its seven decades, the number of "guiltless victims" killed by the Soviet state ran into the "low millions," a claim that takes the word "low" where it should not go. But in another place she refers to the preservation of Lenin's body in that notorious mausoleum in Red Square as "an insult to the countless bodies [he] had destroyed," language that comes far closer to summing up the butcher's bill.

Toward the end of "Lenin on the Train," Ms. Merridale mentions a Stalin -era painting of Lenin stepping out of the train at Petrograd. Just behind and above him stands Stalin, in a pose "suggesting that he could be a mentor or chaperone," but the artist was doing what he had to. Stalin had never, Ms. Merridale explains, been in Lenin's carriage (nor was he, it appears, even at the Finland Station that night). And Stalin was disciple, not mentor: The slaughterhouse he perfected is where Lenin's train was already headed.

Mr. Stuttaford, who writes frequently about culture and politics, works in the international financial markets.

Streetwise Professor **Big Brother Revealed!**

by Craig Pirrong

[Some 200 theaters around the world are screening 1984 to warn about the dark descending night of fascism under Donald Trump.](#) The timing of this could not be more ironic, given that all the news of late makes it abundantly clear that the former administration, not the current one, deserves to be known as Big Brother.

In particular, after a steady trickle of news about surveillance and unmasking of Trump campaign and transition personnel by the US intelligence community, yesterday the story broke that ex-National Security Advisor and noted [f-bomber](#)* Susan Rice—yes, that paragon of honesty, Madam Benghazi Talking Points—had requested the unmasking of numerous Trump personnel picked up in reports of surveillance on foreigners (incidentally, of course! Trust them on this!).

Last month, Ms. Rice played dumb (not a stretch!) by claiming that she had no idea what Devin Nunes was on about. Yesterday, Susie F was unavailable for comment, although one of the Obama creatures working for CNN (but I repeat myself) [tweeted](#): “Just in: ‘The idea that Ambassador Rice improperly sought the identities of Americans is false.’ – person close to Rice tells me.”

Note the presence of the weasel modifier “improperly.” Not a categorical denial of unmasking. I therefore consider this an admission that unmasking did occur.

Within minutes of Rice’s unmasking, the left and the egregious never Trumpers (led by Jennifer Rubin, David Frum, and Evan McMuffin), had their narrative response ready to go: It’s a good thing that Rice was keeping tabs on the evil Trump’s canoodling with the Russkies! Just doing her job and saving the Republic!

Which overlooks one crucial detail: Nunes claims that the unmasked communications he saw had *nothing to do with Russia*. And let’s get real here. It is almost certain that Nunes saw a sample of what the White House has learned. NSC staffer Evan Cohen-Watnick (who played a role in discovering the information, though his exact part is hazy, like most details in this story) was apparently told to stop collecting material by the White House counsel’s office. Presumably they have continued the effort given its political and legal sensitivities. We know that US intelligence systematically collects intelligence on foreigners, meaning that any contacts by the Trump campaign and the Trump administration with anyone in countries ranging from Albania to Zanzibar would have been collected (incidentally! pinkie swear!) and available for unmasking. If Rice was asking for material on contacts with one non-Russian country, it is likely she was asking for it all.

So just who is Big Brother now?

The defense of Rice overlooks another crucial detail. Despite the huffing and puffing of the likes of [Andy Kaufman lookalike Adam Schiff](#) and every talking shill on CNN/MSNBC/ABC/NBC/CBS and writing shill on the NYT/WaPoo, etc., all of the allegations of collusion have produced bupkis in terms of actual, you know, evidence. We are treated to stories about peripheral figures like Carter Page and Paul Manafort dating from about the time of the Trojan War (in political time), but nothing of substance. Even the Flynn “bombshell” is something of a dud: what he actually said to the Russian ambassador has not been revealed, strongly suggesting that nothing explosive transpired—if it had, you can be sure we would have heard of it by now. [My colleague and eminent scholar of Russia Paul Gregory, no shill for Putin, believe me, writes persuasively of the emptiness of the allegations, and their baleful impact on our politics. It even appears that Obama is trying to end this line of attack.](#) There is little doubt that the linked article originated from the Obama camp, and its timing is particularly interesting now that it looks like the issue is boomeranging on him and his closest aides.

I would also point out some other 1984 echoes in the Obama tenure. [Consider this nauseating piece on how different official photography of the White House is under Trump as compared to Obama](#):

Many of the most iconic photos of Barack Obama’s presidency came from Pete Souza, the official White House photographer. Granted extensive access to Obama, he shot the Osama Bin Laden [war room photo](#), [moments](#) the president shared [with Michelle Obama](#), the many famous images of the [president interacting with kids](#), and countless more. These carefully composed photos so defined the public image of Obama that it nearly made Souza a household name.

In its visual representation, as in so many other respects, the Trump administration has made a break with the past. Most of what we see of Trump comes from either the traveling pool of press photographers or the smartphones of his staff. On the one hand there are Getty Images or Reuters shots of Trump [standing at podiums](#) (or [pretending to drive a truck](#)). And on the other, we get unusually informal images of him posing [with world leaders](#) or appearing to be [caught off guard](#). In the meantime, the White House's Flickr account was purged, and the "Photos" section was removed from the official website.

In other words, Obama deliberately created a cult of personality, using "carefully composed" "iconic" (there's a tell!) photos to "define the public image of Obama." Yes, Trump is a narcissist, but he could learn something about narcissism from Obama, who from long before he became president obsessed about creating a public image—a personality cult, in all but name.

And the U-turn to the late-Obama administration and current Democratic hysteria over Russia, the Monopoly of Evil (none of this wimpy multi-country axis stuff) from the previous Reset/"tell Vladimir that after my election I have more flexibility"/"the 1980s called and want their foreign policy back" policies bears more than a little similarity to 1984's Oceania Has Always Been at War With Eastasia. Alas, whereas in 1984 there was only Hate Week, we are now well into Hate Year.

So those tramping to a revival of 1984 to protest Trump are way, way late to the game. They should have expressed their outrage years ago. But that's when they were all part of Big Brother's personality cult, wasn't it?

*I've got nothing against f-bombers! There was a time when I could be the B-52 of f-bombers 😊





**KEEP
CALM
AND
BLAME
RUSSIA**

**REMEMBER THAT
TIME RUSSIANS
SNATCHED 63 MILLION
AMERICANS,
LOADED THEM INTO VANS,
AND FORCED THEM TO
VOTE AGAINST HILLARY?
ME NEITHER.**



Here we see Donald Trump



promising special favors for
Vladimir Putin if he's elected.

IT'S NOT MY FAULT OFFICER



**THE RUSSIANS HACKED
MY SPEEDOMETER**



**THE SAME PEOPLE NOW
CRYING ABOUT "FAKE NEWS"**



**GOT THEIR NEWS FROM
THIS GUY FOR 15 YEARS**



Abe Greenwald ✓

@AbeGreenwald



Follow

People who got their news from Jon Stewart for 15 years are now very angry about "fake news."

RETWEETS

490

LIKES

720



9:50 PM - 6 Dec 2016



65

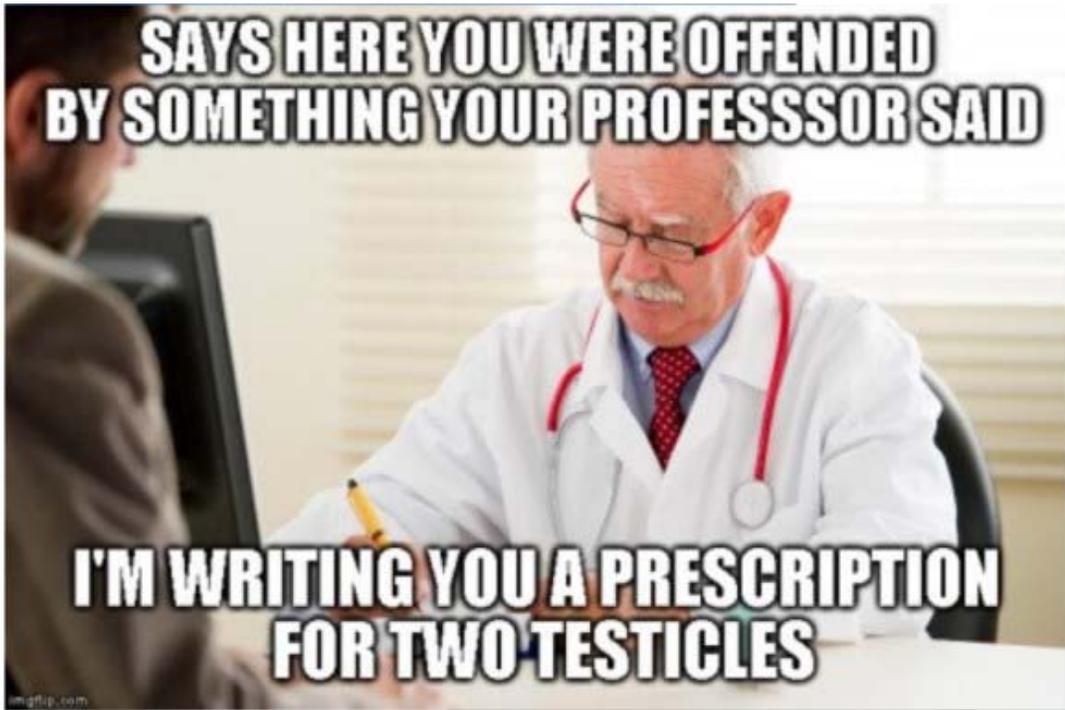


490



720





**HEY OBAMA, SEE THAT
REPUBLICAN MAJORITY?**

A close-up photograph of Barack Obama with his right hand pressed against his forehead, eyes closed, and a pained expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

YOU BUILT THAT! 

PRESIDENT TRUMP..

A close-up photograph of Michelle Obama wearing a black beret and a dark patterned jacket. She has a very intense, shouting expression with her mouth wide open and eyes wide.

SAY IT! SAY IT!