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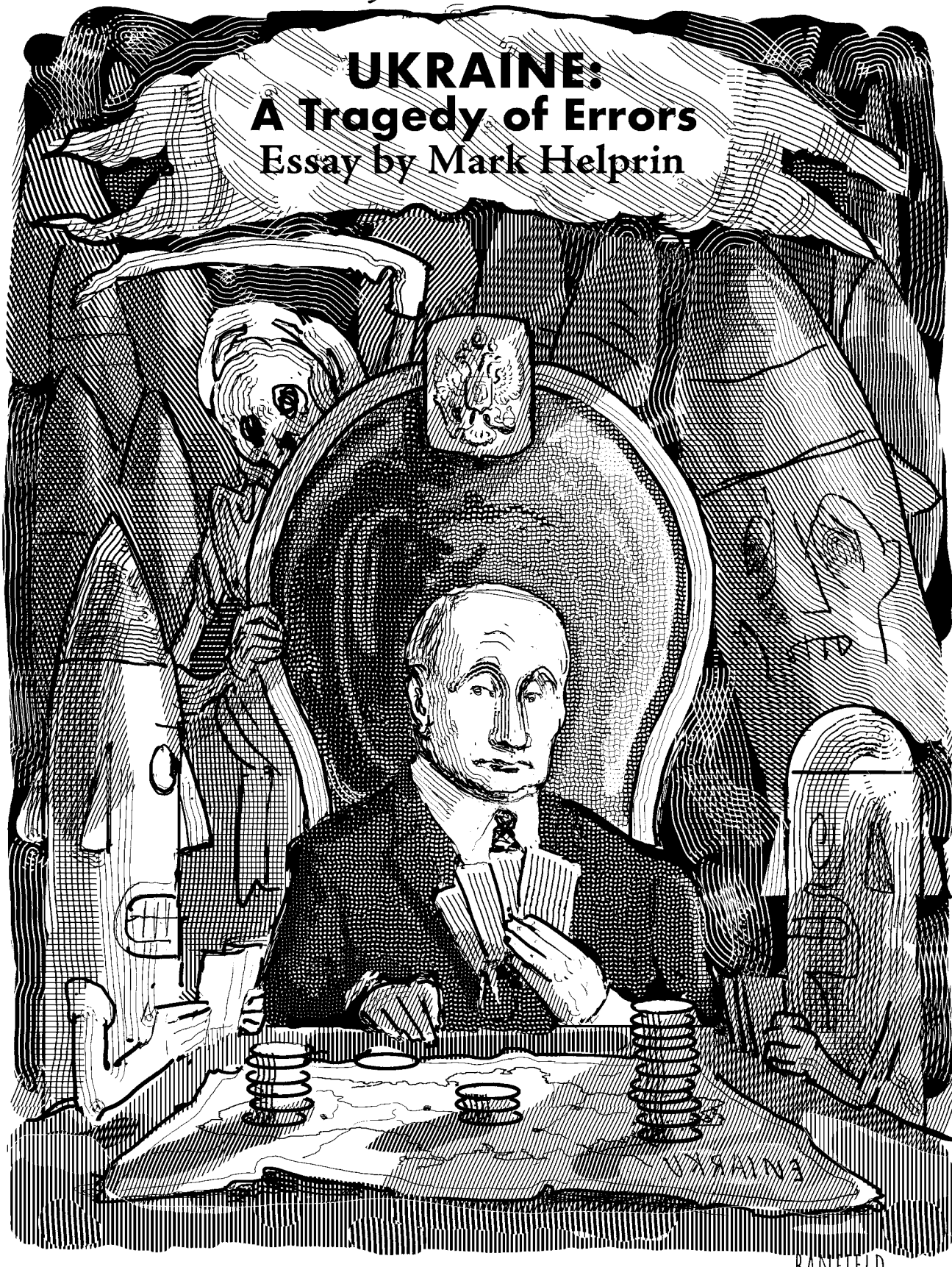
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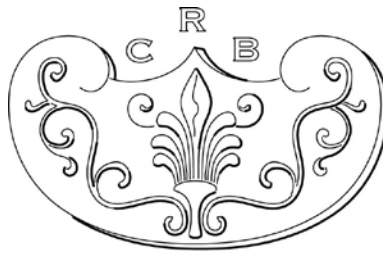
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Essay by Mark Helprin

A TRAGEDY OF ERRORS

The war in Ukraine in context and perspective.

TO WRITE ABOUT WAR AS IT IS ONGOING is like catching a falling knife, or perhaps polishing it. One cannot know what will happen, or the particulars that will have decisively shaped the outcome. With the war in Ukraine barely a month old, writing in March for readers in May is a stressful proposition kept in bounds only by hewing to the fundamentals that by their very nature are best positioned to survive ambitious and specific predictions.

Like so many others, this war is a tragedy of errors, some circumstantial and acute, and others universal and chronic. History is scored by the crescendos of war, with periods of relative calm only between their crests. We may focus upon the breakers for their drama and destruction, but these are part of a perpetual wave that gathers its power in the smooth, silent dips we ignore.

What follows is divided into three broad categories ascending from the specific to the general: an overview of the course of the war and what it has revealed, with attention to the underlying nuclear dimension; the lost opportunities of neither restructuring the post-Cold War European system nor building up our deterrence; what may follow and what must be done.

The focus is more on us than it is on Russia or Putin. Without question, Russia is the obvious aggressor in a war of absolutely unjustifiable conquest, but concentrating on Russia and Ukraine, victimizer and victim, takes the West out of the picture, perversely and undeservedly absolving it of responsibility, not for what Russia has done but for neglecting the steps that may have prevented Russia from doing it. Thinking ourselves thus absolved, we tend to see the war through the disturbed glass of indignation, sympathy, and emotion rather than as a result of our own failures of preparation and deterrence. This habit of mind leads to poor judgment, compensatory recklessness, and needless escalation, and it is what again and again permits such tragedies as we now deplore to spring forth as if by surprise.

I. The Course of the War

Russia at War

BY HIS OWN OBSESSIVELY DETAILED admission, Vladimir Putin has long yearned for the reconstitution of the Soviet Empire. Thus the invasion of Georgia, annexation of the Crimea, absorption of half

the Donbas, and dispatch to Syria—much as Stalin and Hitler sent forces to Spain—of naval and air elements that would present little threat even to the area's regional powers were they not backstopped by Russia's formidable nuclear arsenal within the context of its promiscuous nuclear doctrine.

In each case, Russian initiatives met inadequate or no resistance and engendered no major international reaction. Local forces were too weak, and the great and super powers were content with Russia's carefully crafted self-limitations. Encouraged, Putin set his sights on the whole of Ukraine, but as he assembled his forces he should have been cautioned.

Even if not like American regulars, who are solely professionals, these were regulars in standing formations. And yet despite the long-established east-west transportation networks of the former Soviet Union, it took from October to December of 2021 to deploy the first 100,000, and then into February to bring them up to 190,000. Though the pace may have been deliberately linked to escalating Russian demands, the speed of the preparations (which then carried into actual operations) was a dead giveaway. Israel can mobilize twice that many *reservists* and their equipment

in a few days, and in the 1956 Sinai Campaign and the 1967 Six-Day War, once they had begun to fight they moved against massive enemy resistance in fortified terrain and urban areas at many times the speed of the pre-war Russian advance through only Russia itself and enslaved Belarus. For additional comparison, in March the U.S. moved an entire armored brigade from (Jimmy Carter's) Georgia to Germany—4,000 miles over water and 1,000 over land—in a week. (Such success, however, is not uniform. Before the invasion, the U.S. command in Europe called for a Marine expeditionary force and amphibious ready group, but the request was unfulfilled because of insufficient sealift. Of further discomfort is that in the next two years the navy's 31 amphibious ships will be cut back to 24.)

Confident in the Russian military's rebuilt strength after years of reforms, the command authorities arrayed their slow-moving echelons on three fronts: infantry and armor in the Crimea, in Russia east of the Donbas, and north in Belarus—all supported by tactical air power based at dozens of Russian air bases close by in Russia proper and (five) in the Crimea, which would afford minimal flying time and generous loitering over potential targets in Ukraine. To strengthen the threat from the south, by March 22 a flotilla of at least 21 warships had taken position for amphibious invasion and/or naval gunfire and missile support, both of which would be forthcoming but only in dribs and drabs. This is consonant with the sorry state of the Russian surface navy, always the stepchild of its submarine-crazy admirals.

As a careless journalist might say, Ukraine was "surrounded on three sides." In light of Putin's history of taking just enough tiny mouse bites so as not to wake the cat, what this suggested was not a full-scale invasion but an elaborate feint to force Ukraine to disperse its forces, thereby weakening resistance on its eastern front, the real target. There, assisted by its puppets in what Russia had already carved out of Ukraine, and greatly advantaged by the proximate bulk of its forces just over the line, it would limit its objective to another slice.

It is hard to believe that this was not at least an option, or that the invasion that took place was initially intended. Perhaps in a democracy, in which the elements of decision are structured by consensus and advice, it would have been so. But in a dictatorship decision is the work not of various minds but of one. Of too many examples to cite, some of the choicest are Napoleon, Hitler, and Stalin, champions all of hubris and over-extension. Not that Putin is yet among their ranks, for at this

writing he still has the option perhaps not of conquering Ukraine semi-intact but of completely laying waste to it and claiming victory even if in the long run the West's economic response may do him in.

So Putin—reported by those who came in contact with him leading up to the decision to invade to have been isolated, erratic, and physically changed—may have drunk from the cup of manic confidence. All the world was able to see his sadistic, public abuse of Sergey Naryshkin, his foreign intelligence chief, whose trembling was more authoritatively informative of the concentration of power in Russia than a hundred CIA estimates. The invasion began, pitting Russia against its traditional foe, the Russian way of war.

Clouding accurate assessments of their military prowess, the Russians have convinced themselves and others that the USSR did the heavy lifting of the Second World War. A princeling of Soviet propaganda, this notion has been almost universally embraced, but it is highly misleading. Quite apart from Soviet support of Germany's secretive re-arming in violation of the Treaty of Versailles (for example, by providing training bases in the USSR); its collaboration with Hitler in dismembering Poland; the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which gave Hitler a free hand in the west for two years; and the sabotage of allied resistance by Comintern-directed labor unions, Russia could not have survived absent the massive materiel support supplied by the United States and Britain at the expense of their own abilities to fight and the many lives sacrificed thereby.

Unlike the USSR, the allies were engaged in history's greatest naval wars simultaneously in the Atlantic, the Pacific, and the Mediterranean. They had to cross immense oceans and establish costly beach-heads. They were responsible for the air wars that crippled the industrial capacity of the Axis and Japan, and they alone, as well as conquering Japan, North Africa, Italy, and France, subdued Germany up to the Elbe—far more than their fair share, as the winning of wars is a matter of taking objectives, not the mass death of one's own troops, Russia's chief claim and a nonsensical measure of victory. It is true that the Germans eventually devoted the greater part of their armies to the eastern front, but this cannot be viewed in isolation, as if the Pacific Theater, the navies, North Africa, the Middle East, Burma, Italy, the air wars, and the advance from Normandy to the Elbe were somehow less.

Russia's enormous casualties (by some estimates, 20 million) were the result of a war less of maneuver than of brutal, costly, frontal as-

sault much like the worst of World War I but on a greater scale. The habit persists. Despite present-day Russia's advanced nuclear forces and scattered technological superiorities it is the inheritor of a plodding, immoral, and unimaginative way of war. This cannot be emphasized enough. Like many other Russian things with notable exceptions such as novels, ballet, and space travel, it is shockingly blunt. Given World War I, the Russian Civil War, the government's and party's long wars against the Russian people themselves, World War II, Chechnya, and Syria, that it unfurled this way in Ukraine should not have been a surprise.

A frequent criticism of Soviet and Russian military practice and its proliferation among Soviet satellites and client states is that it suffers from rigid, centralized command. Everyone has encountered chronically frustrated people who believe that, to implement a particular plan, if they can get A to do this, then B will do that, so that C will get D to do something else. This involves a decision tree, like Pachinko, in which the chain is more likely to be broken than not, and it is why armies such as those of the U.K, the U.S., and Israel teach and encourage autonomy and initiative at every level. That way, when, A, B, C, D, etc., prove uncooperative, the battle plan is adjusted on the spot to conform to reality rather than an expired vision.

During exercise and maneuver in the Israel Defense Force (IDF) I never failed to break from the plan and improvise so as to achieve the objective, and each time, my commanders would only pretend to reprimand me. Israel is highly individualistic, informal, and flexible. Like Maoists, its leaders have only recently taken to neckties, and privates often argue with generals, whom they address by their first names. Half a century ago, anyway, they did. Top-down societies lack the spur to improvisation. Without command to act (mere permission does not suffice), even as they are decimated their soldiers will sit still and wait for orders, or they will run away.

In just the first month of the Russo-Ukrainian War, an estimated 40,000 of the 190,000 Russian soldiers set to task were killed, wounded, captured, or missing—a disaster. Russia's problem with functional manpower was here exposed, but even more so by its importation of Chechens and a plan to make use of 40,000 Syrian volunteers. Whatever benefits this may have produced, the specter of Central Asian and Middle Eastern Muslims brought in to kill European Christians (including non-combatants) in their own lands—not that European Russians themselves can't rape and massacre—only reinforced, even if subconsciously, the ancient European disdain

for Russians, and Russians' disdain for themselves, as "Asiatic."

As casualties only increased, the plan was unchanged. One could not be faulted for comparing the Russians to the British marching in close order during our Revolutionary War, and the Ukrainians to the colonists destroying their ranks from behind fluid cover. Massive Russian convoys, single-file and bunched together, were hit front and rear, the vehicles in between able to move neither left nor right because of obstacles, mud, lack of fuel, tires shredded from sitting too long in depot or due to inferior material substituted by officers who pocketed the difference between the monies allocated and those spent.

Though thousands of Russians were killed or put out of commission in the first few days alone, the structural rigidity of the Russian military, or perhaps Putin's direct order, kept the machine grinding for a month until, at the time of this writing, in the name of "consolidation" the goal was shifted to unifying the Donbas and securing a corridor from the Crimea to Russia proper (thus, Mariupol), something more modest and more feasible than, like Georgia, Transnistria, the Crimea, and the first slice of the Donbas, might have failed to awaken the West. Either confirming the original intent or masking the retreat, Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu stated, "The main objectives of the first stage have been achieved...which allows us to focus our main attention and efforts on the principal goal—liberating [the] Donbas." As American politicians know from experience, walking back statements when the damage is done invites contempt.

The Bridge at Voznesensk

MANY FACETS OF RUSSIAN COMBAT failure are illustrated by the attempt to capture the bridge at Voznesensk, a town in the northern part of the delta that separates the Crimea from Odessa. With the fall of Odessa, Russia would have taken a major Ukrainian city, cut off access to the sea, opened a direct route to Moldova, and seriously demoralized Ukraine's defenders. This would require transiting the delta and crossing a number of rivers via strategic bridges including one at Voznesensk. The Russians dispatched a heavy armored column: 40 vehicles—tanks, artillery, and multiple-rocket launchers—with attack helicopters overhead.

The defenses at Voznesensk could have been suppressed by bombing and strafing runs had Russia controlled the air over Ukraine. After all, Russia started out with a largely modern force of 177 bombers, 780

fighters, and 320 attack helicopters. Half a hundred Russian air force bases are close to Ukraine, some cheek by jowl. Where were the 780 fighters and 177 bombers? A probably generous 60% mission capability yields 575. But many of these must be held in the far east, some were in Syria (of which a portion were recalled), and perforce a large number had to remain on guard in the west and north to maintain Russia's vaunted strategic air defense, leaving by my guesstimate about 250 fighter and fighter/ground attack aircraft for use in Ukraine. The bomber numbers follow a similar pattern (far east, strategic readiness, percent mission capable, etc.). Still, Russian heavy bombers are so destructive that just a few could make many Guernicas, which, before his resort to tactical nuclear weapons, is Putin's trump card should he feel pushed to the wall and, as dictators often do, decide to go for broke. After all, most of the world has already condemned him, and he appears not to be the sensitive type.

But Ukraine was not bereft of air defenses. However many of its 71 air-superiority fight-

Why has Putin invaded Ukraine and not the far weaker and smaller Baltic republics, which, like Ukraine, were formerly part of the Soviet Union?

ers it could loft into combat would have been a major problem for the relatively ponderous bombers even under escort. But thus far the "closer" for Ukraine has been its approximately 100 point-defense and short-range surface-to-air missiles, a similar number of medium-range, and more than 300 of long-range, including many S-300s of various types. These are in addition to radar-directed, anti-aircraft guns and at least 5,000 Stinger, Strela, and former Soviet MANPADs (man-portable air-defense systems), which have kept the low altitudes—where the tactical bombing and strafing runs over the bridge at Voznesensk would have taken place—almost entirely clear. Most telling is that Ukraine claims to have downed 97 fixed-wing aircraft and 121 helicopters in just the first few weeks of the war, a great loss despite Russia's relatively large inventory.

Lacking fixed-wing support, the Russian column approached Voznesensk, where it encountered some of the 1,800 heavy artillery pieces, mortars, and multiple-rocket launchers retained by Ukraine after the disintegration

of the USSR, and, more significantly, Javelin and/or the British NLAW (next-generation light anti-tank weapon), that is, man-portable, anti-tank missiles, and perhaps some leftover Soviet ones as well.

Much as during the Gulf wars precision-guided munitions were a revolutionary development in air-to-ground operations, the Javelin, as representative of type, will be heralded in the press as proof of concept for a revolutionary change in land warfare. But it will hardly be news to defense establishments. Proof of this lies in their massive reductions of main battle tanks (MBTs), and we can distinguish these disappearances from general drawdowns by viewing them relative to other assets. In 2021, the U.S. had 2,509 MBTs, a mere 15% of 1991's 16,345. By comparison, it had retained 49% of its combat aircraft numbers. Numerically, Germany has retained 29% of its combat aircraft but only 5% of its tanks. Armor-heavy Russia, however, retained 24% of its MBTs but only 16% of combat aircraft, now probably to its regret.

In the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Israel was dealt a massive blow to its tanks by the Sagger, a Russian anti-tank missile with a two-mile range. Because Saggars are wire-guided and thus dependent upon an infantryman staying exposed until he finds his mark, when Israel loaded its tanks with anti-personnel rounds and preceded them with forward artillery barrages, the problem was largely solved. With a range of up to three miles, Javelins are "fire and forget." The infantryman launches a missile that does the rest as he disappears, identifying the designated target and following it until impact even if it flees. Not even the Russian army has enough artillery rounds to blanket the many continually refreshed square miles in which the operators can disperse, fire, and take cover ahead of a rolling advance.

Modern tanks have reactive armor, a second skin of explosives that blow back at the shaped charge in anti-tank missiles and disrupt the super-hot plasma that would otherwise pierce their steel walls. Though photographs of Russian tanks in Ukraine show that they have surprisingly little reactive armor, it wouldn't matter if they did, as the Javelin has a leading explosive charge that sets off the reactive armor and clears the way for the plasma penetrant. Advantage Javelin vis-à-vis Russian armor and in general. But such advantages rock back and forth as countermeasures are defeated by counter-counter-measures. In answer to Hezbollah's anti-tank missiles, Israel has developed the *Ma'il Ruach* system for its armor (*Trophy* in the West, perhaps because *Ma'il Ruach* means "a breaker of wind") that will automatically and instantly identify,

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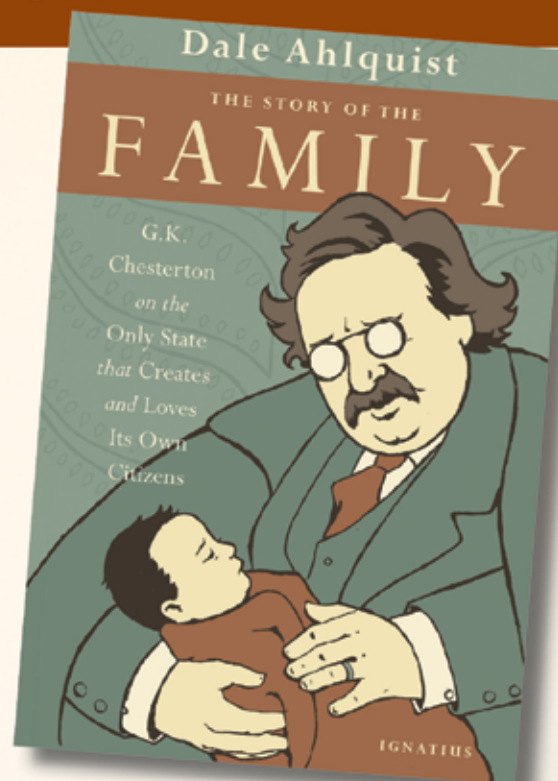
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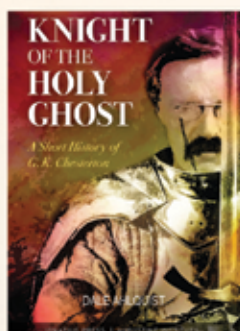


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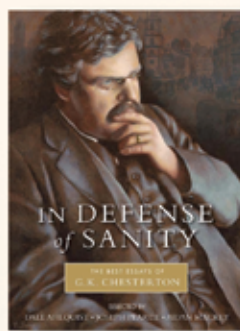
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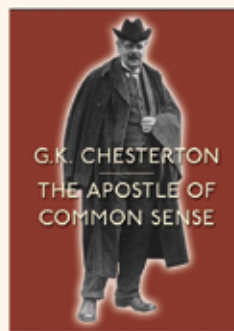
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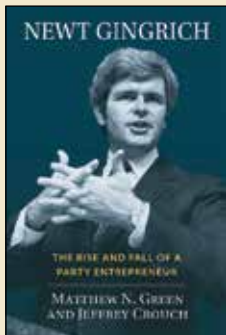
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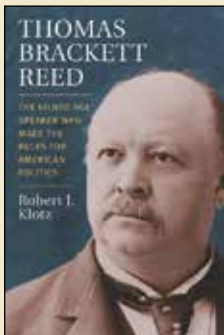


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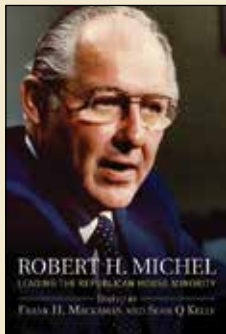
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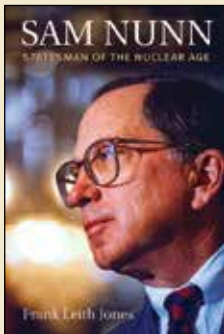


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Israel has fielded it, and Western armies are following suit with a number of domestic homologues that will restore the survivability and utility of the tank. At present, Russia has no such thing in Ukraine and Ukraine has, or will be re-supplied with, at least 10,000 or more Javelins, NLAWs, and other such missiles. Do the math. Russia's loss of at least 400 tanks by March 18 must have been shocking to such an armor-focused military with, tactically, little else upon which to fall back. At least a few of these tanks were destroyed in a fierce battle at Voznesensk, to which we return.

There, though they could have avoided it, the defeated Russians retreated or died. The objective was to secure the Voznesensk bridge over the Mervovid, a small tributary of the larger Bug River, and proceed on Route P55 to cross another bridge over the Bug, thence to Odessa. Though the first bridge was destroyed and the second probably would have been, the Russians didn't reach either.

They could easily have bypassed both the bridges and the town and been on their way had they crossed the Bug south of Voznesensk where it is only 360 feet wide. The Soviets planned that in moving across European territory they would have to cross rivers this wide or wider 20 times every 600 miles. This remains the accepted doctrine of the Russian military, which possesses an unmatched variety of bridging equipment. Were it not available to the forces moving toward Voznesensk northward from the Crimea over a territory veined with rivers this would be a revelatory oversight. Had it been available and not provided, it would be even worse. Whether because of carelessness, indifference, poor planning, or the lack of imagination inherent in a rigid command structure, the failure illuminates the hard-to-shed disadvantages of which the Russians, burdened from the start, were apparently unaware.

The Conduct of the West

THIS DOES NOT IMPLY THAT THE WEST'S reaction on a military strategic level has been without dangerous errors, proposals, and near misses. In a crisis one must hope for a Goldilocks approach, neither too little nor too much. Following from Henry Adams's dictum that "[i]n all great emergencies...everyone [is] more or less wrong," getting it just right is often a matter of luck or divine intervention. In this case, the extent of Western support or direct interference has thus far found a path between dangerous

arguments on the one hand, and proposals crafted in ignorance of precedent, operational art, and, chillingly, nuclear doctrine and strategy on the other. Success and restraint so far may be attributed partly to skilled and capable officials, but also, given the Biden Administration, to the unexpected gifts of cowardice.

First, level of supply. NATO has been careful not to pour its prime systems into Ukraine, relying instead on masses of highly effective infantry weapons (Javelin, Stinger, etc.); the Turkish, tank-killing, Bayraktar medium UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle); and extremely valuable, under-the-radar, and unheralded intelligence sharing, which alone is worth whole divisions. Modern warfare is premised upon an almost omniscient battle "picture," and in this the United States is supreme and Russia comparatively blind. It would be hard to exaggerate its value to Ukraine even though Ukraine is limited technically and otherwise in what it can receive. Analogously, it is like the difference between firing a hundred rounds toward a target imprecisely or hitting it dead on with the first shot.

Materiel is also and obviously a link in a chain that if broken means failure and if strengthened elevates the chances of success. So why not transfer the "up to 28" MiG-29s Poland had proposed and the U.S. rejected? Although they would have added to extant Ukrainian air defense and ground support, they would also have been highly escalatory, being larger weapons capable of taking the war, accidentally or otherwise, into Russian territory. Ukrainian aircraft can do this as well, but directly tying NATO to warfare that might strike the Russian homeland is not something to be taken lightly. Among other things, as we will see, from the Russian point of view this would crack open the nuclear door more than just slightly.

Much more escalatory was the proposal that NATO itself enforce a no-fly zone over Ukraine, gambling against the possibility of direct combat between Russia and the West, something (not including the Axis and apart from accidental shootdowns, stray munitions, and the U-2) last seen in 1919, with the potential of subsequent moves and counter-moves drawing even unwilling actors into large-scale war. Arguments in support of a no-fly zone cited the presence of Soviet surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and advisers in North Vietnam's air defense against American planes, and Soviet participation with Egypt and Syria in the War of Attrition and the 1973 October War with Israel, an American client. The analogies are inappropriate. Had Soviet-piloted MiGs over North Vietnam engaged American forces in combat, with the ability

to take the fight to American bases and ships, it would have been a major step up from “advisers” who “helped” the North Vietnamese man their SAMs. And it would have been that much more significant had this occurred adjacent to the United States, for example in northern Mexico, much as Ukraine is adjacent to Russia.

The Soviets and Israelis fought directly in air battles and air-to-ground combat, with pilots from both sides, and Russian soldiers on the ground, killed and wounded. But in this geographically isolated proxy war Russians did not fight Americans. The only Americans involved were American-Israeli dual citizens in the IDF. Now, based upon misinterpretation of inexact analogies, it really would be a bridge too far to pit NATO pilots in NATO aircraft against their Russian counterparts on, or perhaps accidentally even crossing, the borders of Russia. And yet the no-fly zone has been a subject of passionate advocacy. A somewhat better comparison, the Cuban Missile Crisis, also does not support the kind of reckless intervention that would risk such an encounter. In response to American intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) stationed in Turkey 590 miles from Odessa and 1,300 miles from Moscow, the Soviets began to deploy IRBMs in Cuba, 200 miles from Miami and 1,100 from Washington. Tit for tat, but, finding this intolerable, the U.S. was willing to go to the brink. Whether because of the psychological effect of a certain American nuclear advantage or America’s overwhelming conventional superiority in the Western Hemisphere—or because of the Soviets’ sense of their own strategic finesse, having induced John Kennedy to agree to remove America’s Jupiter missiles from Turkey—the Soviets backed down. Nikita Khrushchev dared not fight a conventional naval battle with the U.S. or contest an amphibious invasion of Cuba so close to vast American forces with the benefit of a ready-made beach-head at Guantanamo.

The situation is now reversed. Despite poor Russian performance in Ukraine and NATO’s collectively greater military resources, what NATO has in its quivers is scattered all over the place and, despite recent augmentations, thinly deployed in the east. A direct NATO challenge to Putin next to his heartland would be a gift he would gratefully receive. It would restore Russian morale, cement his hold on power, and give him the opportunity for a general mobilization that would make the West blink like Bambi. He would love it, and underlying his confidence would be his nuclear arsenal. The subject in the United States of little attention and inadequate understanding, nuclear strategy and in particular Russian

nuclear doctrine are the controlling factors in the modulation of both Russia’s seemingly too bold provocations and the West’s seemingly timid response.

The Nuclear Dimension

THOUGH AS MANY SCHOOLS OF nuclear strategy exist as there are celebrity academics who ascend from what once were prestigious universities into the national security bureaucracy, there is no debating that nuclear doctrines, strategies, and thresholds differ country by country, something often perilously ignored by experts and always by politicians content with simple and inapplicable mirror imaging. Doctrines regarding tactical nuclear weapons are crucial to the use or threat of force involving the proximate militaries of nuclear powers (here Russia versus NATO’s U.S., U.K., and France).

Russian doctrine is a fusion of inherited Soviet and more recent Russian general nuclear strategy, with a new sub-strategy regarding tactical nuclear use. Consonant with historical and persistent Russian temperament, demeanor, and—it cannot be avoided—brutality, Soviet and Russian nuclear doctrines respectively were and are far more promiscuous than those of the West. The Russians would point out that the U.S. gave birth to nuclear weapons, is the only country to have used them, and that despite the West’s pride in what the Russians regard as its unjustified view of its own restraint, Truman, Churchill, and MacArthur seriously considered nuclear use in Korea, General Westmoreland did so in Vietnam, and—unlike the USSR—the United States has never pledged no-first-use. Of course, in nuclear strategy the technical term for no-first-use is “bullshit,” as any nuclear-armed country threatened with catastrophe, much less extinction, will pay no attention to such pledges. This is highly relevant to the war in Ukraine.

Notably and continually, public Soviet nuclear doctrine suggested little distinction between strategic and tactical use. That is, if you are losing in Poland, use long-range nuclear weapons to nuke Washington, and use long-range and tactical nuclear weapons to nuke Poland. This doctrine was laid down by, among others, marshal of the Soviet Union V.D. Sokolovsky in his seminal *Soviet Military Strategy* (1963), in the Marxist canon of the era a combination of Clausewitz and Kissinger: “The boundaries between the front and the rear in future war will be erased.... Nuclear armed missiles...will be the main instruments in realizing these possibilities.” Throughout his book, one hears a virtual hymn to nuclear

use undifferentiated as a tactical and strategic resource.

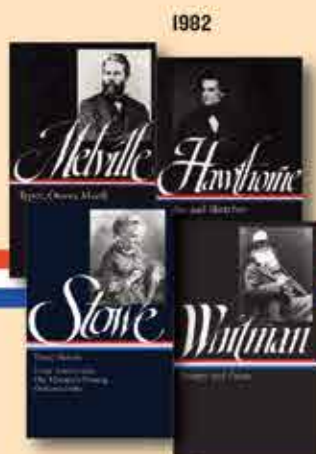
With subtle variations, the approach is echoed again and again, such as in “Nuclear Weapons and War,” in *Red Star*, 1970: “The art of contemporary warfare demands in many cases the use equally of both nuclear and conventional armaments...against the enemy’s tactical and operational formations.” Or as late as 1981 by marshal of the Soviet Union and member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Nikolai Ogarkov, who, in an article in *Kommunist*, perhaps in response to budgetary constraints, stressed nuclear effects and (appropriately now) expressed reduced confidence in the capabilities of the ground forces.

The Russian inheritors of such thinking have moved away from its strategic application somewhat as they speak more of deterrence than of actual use, but they have retained and even amplified Soviet permissiveness in regard to tactical use. In the signal and significant act of abandoning the longstanding Soviet pledge of no-first-use, in their *National Security Concept* of 2000 they state that Russia “must have nuclear forces capable of delivering specified damage to any aggressor state or coalition of states in any situation” (emphasis added).

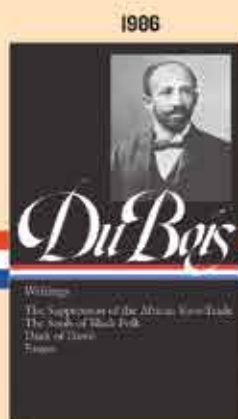
Stemming from this is what has become known as “escalate to de-escalate.” Quite simply, if things are not going well on the battlefield, use one or more tactical nuclear weapons to halt the action and push back your opponent by taking advantage of his fear of escalation into general nuclear war. It is even possible that if—with the tightening stranglehold of sanctions and the non-appearance of a Chinese bail-out—Russia becomes so economically prostrate as to invite comparison to the revolutionary consequences of its collapse in the First World War, it might in desperation play a nuclear card such as escalate to de-escalate. Because escalation tends to lead to further escalation, escalate to de-escalate is a gambler’s policy analogous to slapping a hysteric to calm him down. Shrouded in ambiguity, its actual existence is debated, but one can transcend academic arguments and battles of citations to see why from the Russian point of view it is a likely imperative. To wit, the policy switch.

Following World War II, when the Soviets had a massive advantage in armored and infantry divisions in Europe, the U.S. relied on its strategic nuclear monopoly to deter an invasion. When the USSR negated that with its own strategic nuclear forces, its conventional advantage remained, and rather than match this tank for tank the U.S. did so with much cheaper and less burdensome tactical nukes,

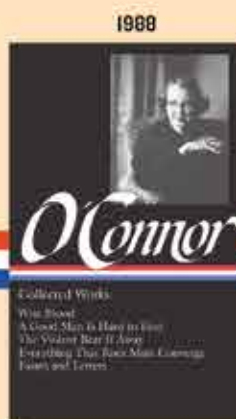
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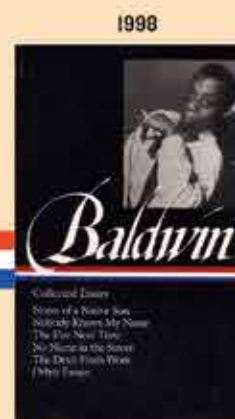
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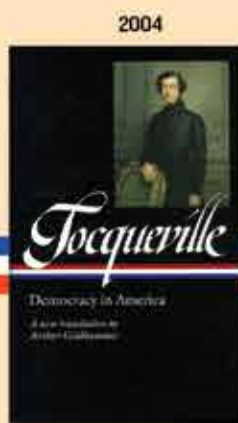
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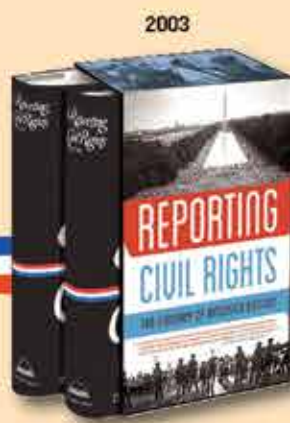
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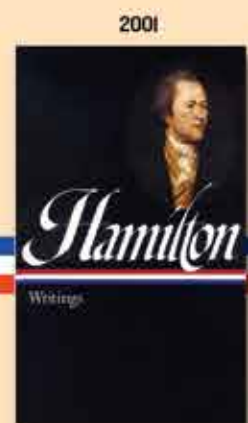
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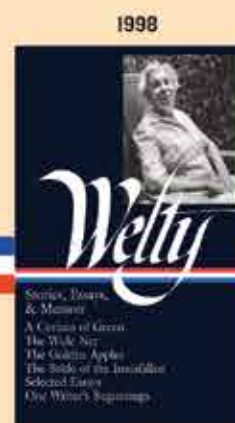
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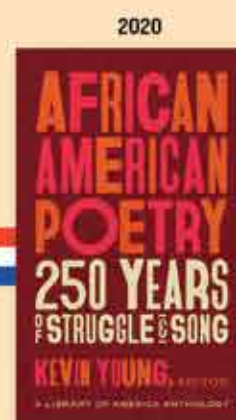
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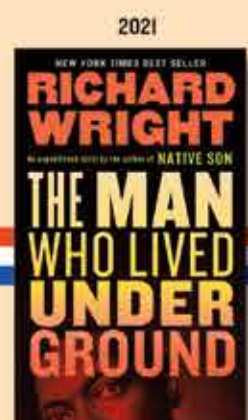
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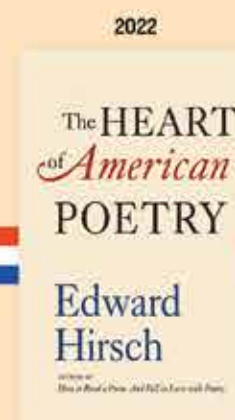
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more than 7,000 of them in 41 different systems, from short-range missiles to nuclear artillery, depth charges, and “atomic demolition munitions” (do not drive your tank over one of those). If you wondered why the Soviets claimed no-first-use and the U.S. did not, now you know.

As the Soviet Union disintegrated, lost its Warsaw Pact allies and much of its territory, and descended into penury, it lost as well the numerical advantages upon which it had relied, after the advent of precision-guided munitions, mistakenly, and it adopted what had previously been the American strategy. While not committing to no-first-use *de jure*, the U.S. has *de facto* reduced its tactical nuclear arsenal to an estimated 200 or fewer in Europe, while Russia maintains (and modernizes) at least 2,000.

Although collectively NATO’s conventional advantage is diffuse and its extended lines are vulnerable to a concentrated Russian punch-through, Russia fears a drawn-out conflict in which NATO mobilizes and concentrates its forces where they are needed. Thus, Russia’s embrace of escalate to de-escalate. And thus, because this doctrine is habituated in a rigid military establishment known for neither improvisation nor departure from set guidelines, the risk of nuclear escalation in a direct NATO-Russian clash is added to the more inchoate potential of escalation to general nuclear warfare. More specifically, if a major, conventionally escalated Russian offensive such as in the reconstituted push for the Donbas is frustrated at great and politically threatening cost to Russia and Putin respectively, it may bring us perilously close to tactical nuclear use.

That is why the NATO governments properly and wisely are set on avoiding such contretemps anywhere outside NATO’s clearly demarcated physical and figurative declaratory lines.

You might not agree, however, were you guided by public opinion and certain expert advice. A March *Wall Street Journal* poll found that almost a third of Americans endorsed a no-fly zone over Ukraine, and one in ten would send U.S. troops. That is, in both cases, committing the United States to war with Russia adjacent to the Russian homeland. What could go wrong?

And contrary to the notion that the body politic rots from the head down, it actually rots from the body up only to culminate in the head. Thus, we have Donald Trump’s version of the Cuban Missile Crisis: “We have to have Biden stop saying that...we will not attack Russia ever because they are a nuclear power, right?” The U.S. should “bomb the shit out of Russia.” This is not the way someone who was, and may again, be the president of the

United States should be horsing around, if indeed he was. Not to slight the Left, from the opportunistic slanderer of American troops in Vietnam, ancient senator, former presidential nominee, and Iranian patriot John Kerry we have (perhaps because he is a czar) rather than concern about the rape of Ukraine and the danger of a nuclear clash with Russia, a bunch of wan burps about greenhouse gases.

Much so-called expert opinion has been, once again to use a technical term, bonkers. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* at the end of March, David Gompert, acting director of National Intelligence, 2009-10, states that, “Russian doctrine on nuclear war is clear.” No, it is not, deliberately and otherwise. “Moscow has said it would consider initiating nuclear hostilities if Russian soil is attacked by non-nuclear weapons or the existence of the Russian state is in danger,” not that “Russia would resort to nuclear weapons if NATO were to intervene in defense of Ukraine.” Nor has it precluded such use. And what are we to make of this sentence: “Mr. Putin says NATO intervention in Ukraine could escalate to nuclear war, but not that Russia would use nuclear weapons in reaction to such intervention.” Saying that it might, while not saying that it would, is not saying that it wouldn’t.

The premise of the article is that considerations of nuclear escalation are overblown. Among other things, “Russia has at least as much to fear as NATO.” Why? Because “the U.S. has exceptional, multilayered capabilities for such a contingency,” including “direct nonnuclear strikes with global reach and pinpoint accuracy against Russia’s retaliatory (‘second strike’) nuclear forces,” as well as “offensive nuclear forces that could further decimate Russia’s strategic deterrent on the ground. Whatever Russian missiles survive such disarming strikes would be picked off by U.S. missile defense systems, or so the Russians believe.”

The Russians do not believe this, because they know, as we know, that our undeveloped missile defense is anything but impervious. What is astounding here is that a former high official, in arguably the nation’s most influential newspaper since the *New York Times* exiled itself to the woke funny farm, has casually discussed a “successful” nuclear war with Russia as something that in prospect would deter Moscow’s resort to its policy of escalate to de-escalate. Not only is this declaratory escalation par excellence, but the strategy outlined is, shall we say, inept. Among other things, it takes no account of launch on warning and (failing that) the hundreds of warheads from submarine-launched missiles that would easily overwhelm our stunted missile defenses.

Unfortunately, such careless and dangerous thinking is consonant with so many of the tragic errors that have led the world to this pass and may in the future lead it further into jeopardy.

II. Lost Opportunities

Restructuring Post-Cold War Europe

FOR 40 YEARS, IN HUNDREDS OF COLUMNS in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, *National Review*, *CRB*, and many other publications, my theme, arising from what Thomas Sowell calls the tragic vision, has been the necessity of adequate deterrence, vigilance, and preparation. For example, from a 1988 *Wall Street Journal* column, “War in Europe: Thinking the Unthinkable”:

History has not been cauterized. After countless wars and upheavals, the system of blocs and alliances remains, with the Balkans and Eastern Europe, as ever, the engine of instability. The existence of nuclear weapons may unsettle the custodians of the international system, but the system itself, practiced survivor of holocausts, hardly blinks. Certain themes are stronger and deeper than wishful thinking would have them: War has been an integral part of history, and the elements of history have not changed.

Or from the *Wall Street Journal* in 1991: “The one great lesson of the [Gulf] war is that the conventional defense of Europe is inadequate, and that, therefore, the nuclear threshold is unacceptably low.” For almost half a century it has been easy to see far in advance the swelling of terrorism, the advent of emerging pathogens, the rise of China, and the return of Russia.

False modesty demands that I make no special claim to prophecy, and assert that others have done better, but in the ready access to what I have written I have confirmation that what is happening now was foreseeable, and foreseen. After the Soviet Union dissolved, everyone watched it fester like Weimar Germany. I thought, why not “A Marshall Plan for Russia” (the *Wall Street Journal*, 1998): “We now approach Russia...with neither the discipline nor the foresight to bring it into the economic fold of the West, nor the will to maintain at the same time a military establishment unquestionably strong enough to dissuade it from adventurous alternatives.” Perhaps even that wouldn’t have been enough. What was really necessary was for the West

to restructure the continental system out of the broken shards of Eastern Europe so as to avoid a Russian *revanche* and a new Cold War. In “For a New Concert of Europe” (*Commentary*, 1996), and as defense and foreign relations adviser to Bob Dole in his presidential campaign, I promoted the unoriginal idea, more or less cribbed from longstanding British policy and the Congress of Vienna, of preserving the continental balance of power rather than tolerating an imbalance guaranteed to excite in aggrieved parties the desire for revenge that has powered so much of the violent back and forth of history.

Think of north-south lines in which, in the east, Finland, Belarus, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria would be neutral; in the center, the Baltic republics, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary would form a central block armed after the Swiss, former Swedish, and Israeli reserve models, and in the west, Switzerland, Austria, and the former Yugoslav states would echo the neutrality of the neutral states in the east. The three lines would unite in a free-trade area with the hope of eventually integrating Russia and Western Europe. Neither Russia nor NATO, separated by a thousand miles and a well-defended center alliance with a neutral block on each of its shoulders, would have reason to fear.

Not only was such a thing apparently inconceivable to the “statesmen” of the era, but President Bill Clinton saw fit to “guarantee” (with, yes, Russia) Ukraine’s security and favor its admission to NATO. To believe either that, no matter what, Russia would gobble up its lost regions, or that NATO’s eastern expansion to Russia’s western borders was irrelevant, was on the one hand to indict the West for failing to maintain sufficient deterrent strength, and on the other to deny Russia the interests and fears that we would certainly have ourselves understood and devotedly pursued had the United States collapsed and the Warsaw Pact expanded to Canada.

It was highly reckless for Western governments not to recognize that, justified or not (it is irrelevant), Russia would react to the diminution of its spheres of influence. We hear of late that there should be no such things. But whether or not ideal, there are. Nor are they always entirely bad. When at Yalta the allies divvied up Europe they enslaved much of the East to Stalin. This is justly asserted. What seldom is asserted, however, is that this tragic concession spared us a third world war.

Since declaring the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the United States has claimed—and maintained by more than 100 uses of armed

force—the greatest sphere of influence the world has ever seen. Comprising the entire Western Hemisphere, half the earth, it is far more capacious than the British Empire ever was. Not merely *disallowing* foreign bases, the Monroe Doctrine has been the justification for *maintaining* American bases in the Caribbean and Central America, even on the territory of a hostile Cuba. (How long will it be until we are tested by the establishment of a Chinese military base in South or Central America? Although, *pace* Justin Trudeau, probably not in Canada.) And yet we thought nothing of challenging Russia by expanding (and in the process severely weakening) NATO. It is too late now for NATO not to arm up and hold its expanded ground, but its enlargement has not only created the need to do so but made it that much more difficult.

In simultaneously swelling and short-changing NATO, its members disgraced themselves in failing to recollect the structural excellence that enabled its great historical success: binding by treaty the richest

Like the wars in Manchuria, Abyssinia, and Spain, this war is a deep-sounding portent of things to come.

and most militarily powerful countries in the world to the defense of their heartlands, on a relatively narrow front. Even diluted by over-extension and military diminution, it retains much of its effectiveness. When this war began, a common opinion was that were Putin to succeed, or perhaps even while pursuing his aims in Ukraine, he would then roll on into NATO. This represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the military balance and the power of declaratory policy.

For example, why has Putin invaded Ukraine and not the far weaker and smaller Baltic republics, which, like Ukraine, were formerly part of the Soviet Union? He might have taken in a day’s air and armor blitzkrieg the 150-200 miles separating the Russian border from the Baltic—132 miles to Tallinn, 20 miles from the Belarusian border to Vilnius. The attack could literally have enveloped the three states from all sides: from Kaliningrad in the south, the sea north and west, and Russia in the east. The road structure favors a rapid advance, and the national armed forces opposed number fewer than 65,000 and three

main battle tanks. The advantages: easy, done before anyone can react, gaining more access to the sea, rejoining Kaliningrad and Russian territory, increasing strategic depth, embracing and consolidating Belarus into the former empire, creating the impression of invincibility, shoring up domestic political support with a successful campaign, further enveloping and demoralizing Ukraine, and creating the possibility of breaking NATO’s Article 5, which obliges the entire alliance to counter an attack on any of its members.

In answer to the question, the Baltic republics are far less valuable than Ukraine, Russia has fewer historical connections or claims, a move against them would have alerted the West *before* a move on Ukraine, and, most importantly, after breaking the symbolic NATO tripwire forces Russia would have triggered Article 5, with an exceedingly high chance of catastrophic, full-scale war. The power of declaratory policy backed by many nations, immense collective force even if not at the ready, and a long history of success cannot be stressed enough.

Stress, however, has another meaning, and when the Cold War ended, NATO’s component nations gratuitously subjected their alliance to perilous stress that, had it continued along its ascending trajectory, would have destroyed it. In 1991, NATO-Warsaw Pact borders stretched for 1,358 miles and NATO’s remit was confined to 16 nations. At present, its frontiers with Russia, Belarus, and Moldova run for 2,821 miles, having more than doubled. To apprehend what this means, consider that the additional 1,463 miles to patrol and defend are equal to the distance from Montreal to Miami. As we have seen this spring, when stray, explosives-laden military drones wander over these lines and crash (one near a college dormitory), NATO’s air defense, like that of the U.S. itself, is semi-comatose. In addition, thinking that history had ended, NATO took on out-of-area missions in support of the wars in Southwest Asia.

Despite NATO’s expansion, most of its now 30 nations have reduced their military power steadily over time. Germany went from total military manpower, active and reserve, of 1,485,700 in 1991 to 213,550 in 2021; from artillery of all types, 4,579 to 262; submarines, 24 to 6; fighter and fighter/ground-attack aircraft, 643 to 208; air defense surface-to-air missiles, 658 to 50; and from spending 2.3% of GDP on defense to 1.4% (in 2020).

This hardly comports with NATO’s increased responsibilities and its welcome of nations so weak as to be little more than dependent liabilities. The case for spendthrift allocations of the peace dividend was insufficient

even in the '90s when Russia's tongue was on the floor. Among other things, the sacrifice of overwhelming superiority showed Russia (and China) that catching up was feasible, and when Russia and China embarked upon concentrated efforts to do just that, neither Germany nor NATO nor the United States reacted. The assumption was that the United States could pick up the slack everywhere, but it, too, has slackened.

Deterrence

LIKE DEGENERATE ROME, WE ARE A spendthrift nation focused on comfort and entertainment rather than survival. Unless Americans want to live in a world dominated by totalitarian dictatorships like Russia and China, nuclear-armed theocracies like Iran, and crazy states like North Korea, the United States must restore, rather than continue to diminish, its military power. In assessing capabilities, expenditures seldom portray absolute values, but they faultlessly show trends. U.S. defense spending as a proportion of GDP in the *peacetime* years 1940–2000 was 5.7%. Watch what happens: 1960–2000, all years, 6.17%; 2000–2010, *war years*, 4.0%; 2010–2020, 3.85%; 2015–2020, 3.4%; the Trump years, with much boasting about having rebuilt the military, 3.36%; budgeted for 2022, 3.2%.

The congressional omnibus bill passed in March raises 2021's defense expenditures from 3.3% to 3.48% for 2022, less than two tenths of a percentage point of GDP. Proposed budgets are still subject to congressional emendation, but given 8.5% inflation nothing suggested is anything but a cut in real terms. Incredibly, this is our response to China's rise, an imminent Iranian nuclear breakout should Israel not step in, and Russia's war on Ukraine. Among the many particulars: further reducing by a net of 15 ships the rapidly shrinking, rusting, and burning U.S. Navy, which soon may be not only smaller than China's but, at the pace of the two fleets' crossed-swords trajectories, half its size; and further reducing procurement of the single fifth-generation aircraft (the F-35) America produces.

The deliberate degradation of America's great and (since World War II) pre-eminent military power has stimulated the rise of China's military, the (primarily strategic) revival of Russia's, and Iran's wars in the Middle East. This willful neglect, the shameful and disastrous retreat from Afghanistan, and America's virtual surrender to Iran no doubt figured in Vladimir Putin's calculations in regard to what he might call the recent unpleasantness in Ukraine.

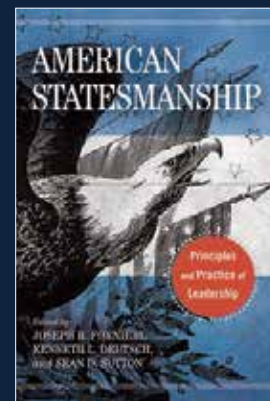
The hollowing-out of America's military invites a multi-volume treatise far beyond the scope of this article, but massive and unimpeachable evidence is there for anyone to see as it accumulates day by day. Weakness invites both contempt and action. This we have seen, and we will see more of it. Hard power cannot be replaced by the "soft power" of sanctions, tariffs, public opinion, and international law, the ideological go-to's of the Left. Despite Europe having bound itself so tightly to Russian gas and oil that in the first weeks of the war it kept Russia afloat with \$40 billion in payments, the West's soft power response to Russia's war on Ukraine has been both surprising and surprisingly vigorous, if not yet effective, and may it continue and strengthen. The structural danger remains, however, in that lacking its own soft power Russia can respond only with hard power and will always do so unless Western strategy is backstopped by unchallengeable military might properly deployed to threaten and deter.

III. Going Forward

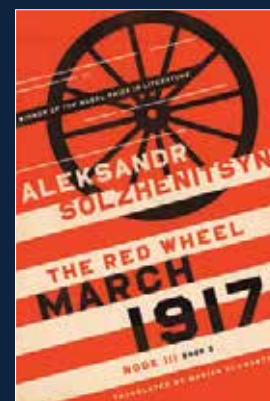
IWOULD NOT BE SURPRISED IF—AS IN American political campaigns when, unbeknownst to the public, candidates reach a truce in regard to introducing damaging information each has on the other—NATO and Russia had arrived fairly early at some sort of red-phone agreement with respect to figurative and literal lines of demarcation. Otherwise, NATO's carefully observed limitations on weapons transfer (other than clandestine and "quiet," of which evidence exists) and Russia's restraint in attacking the vulnerable intra-Ukrainian supply corridors are hard to fathom. No matter how limited are Russian air and missile forces, they should be able to cut road and rail lines and/or level Ukrainian cities. With the exception of Mariupol, as of this writing they have done neither. Though it is understandable that they would want something left of what they conquer, leaving Ukraine's military supply routes intact would seem to be a mistake even they would not make.

If instead of consolidating, licking its wounds, and trying to restore its relations with the West, Russia prepares for and launches a broad, Kursk-like offensive from the east in imitation of its brutal, slow roll west during World War II, I believe that—given continuing supply to Ukraine of precision-guided anti-tank missiles and UAVs, and replenishment of anti-aircraft/anti-missile systems, from shoulder-fired to high-altitude and long-range such as the S-300—Russia will fail.

EPIC MINDS, EPIC BOOKS

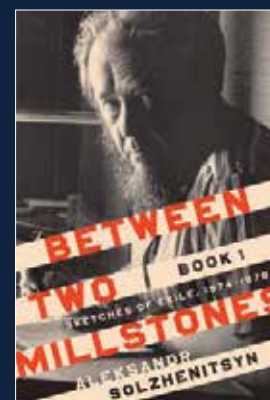


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Unless it falls back on nuclear use, or it is able to cut off Ukraine's supply of weapons and fuel coming from the west and crossing the country toward the battle fronts. If Russia could do this, Ukraine will be unable to resist the unceasing heavy hammer blows from enemy tanks, artillery, and aircraft. Therein lies the key: either the continuation of Russia's inability to starve Ukraine of logistics—caused by a combination of Ukraine's competent defense and Russian deficiencies or hesitation in targeting, missilery, and bombing—or a change that enables Russia to cut off supply.

In this regard it is crucial that NATO continue its provision especially of anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems that can shield the supply routes, at the current level and perhaps, with precise calibration, upping the game somewhat—but taking great care not to cross the line into direct intervention either in the air or by the introduction of non-clandestine advisers or the most advanced Western armaments. This might lead Russia to conclude, correctly or not, that such intervention had become intolerable and given it reason to escalate into the nuclear realm.

Whatever the fate of Ukraine—unlike NATO, for which the declaratory lines have long been set and understood—we dare not get to the point where we find ourselves either ignoring a nuclear threat or calling what we believe to be a nuclear bluff. There are some people, gamblers by nature, who think that this is no big deal. It is a very big deal.

If the present dynamic continues with neither Russia nor the West breaking form, the war may drag on not so much like the stalemate of the First World War but rather like the Cold War, or the eight-year war in Ukraine's east, or perhaps the Muslim-Jewish war that with its flares and rests has lasted well over a hundred years and will be in the headlines tomorrow. Political upheaval in either camp might radically change the lines on the battlefields or even bring a painful, incomplete peace. Failing that, unless Ukraine collapses (always a possibility), the war's continuation is likely even should Ukraine decisively push Russia back, or Russia make gradual, destructive advances from the territories it now holds.

In the longer view informed by history and even pre-history, the wars of Central Asia never seem to end. Ukraine's hope of salvation is that it will be able to lean far enough west to escape, a very uncertain proposition given the West's ambivalence about it and the long-standing gravitational mass and jealous char-

acter of Russia. We are watching as the latest chapter of this drama unfolds before our eyes.

Assuming that the present conflict does not lead to the direct confrontation of NATO and Russia, and therefore to a potential nuclear face-off, in which case everything changes, much can and needs to be done—not that it will be. Like the wars in Manchuria, Abyssinia, and Spain, this war is a deep-sounding portent of things to come. Avoiding them, like so many necessary things, is simple, hard, and unlikely.

First, it is far too late “For a New Concert of Europe,” which had set the balance of power in the 19th century. Even when the greater mass of the continent had dissolved and was as malleable as it ever could be, fundamental reorganization was an order far taller than Bill Clinton, John Major, and Helmut Kohl were capable of filling. Now not even the love child of Klemens von Metternich and Henry Kissinger would be up to the task. NATO's eastern lines—until the war in Ukraine, forbearingly and correctly kept weak—must be strengthened in light of Russia's violation of that spirit and because its conduct of the ground war has revealed that the Baltic republics and Poland need not be a walkover.

All weapons are potentially offensive, but there are subtleties. NATO air bases set back from the Russian and Belarusian borders so as to afford good loiter time at, but not far beyond, them would be defensive rather than provocative, although Russia would be certain to call them provocative. Heavy investment in a belt of short- and medium-range surface-to-air missiles similarly placed would yield the same benefits. And if for every Russian fighter/ground-attack plane and for every infantry fighting vehicle NATO's eastern forces deployed either several Stingers or five Javelins or armed drones (“COVID relief” pocket change), a Russian conventional assault would become unlikely of success, closing off the prospect of toppling any more dominoes in Eastern Europe. To get there, however, the irresponsibly closed Stinger production line would have to be reopened, and the output of Javelins accelerated to require less than the five years estimated for replenishing America's insufficient and recently depleted stocks. This can and should be done.

But then there is the nuclear dimension. To deal with Russia's creeping nuclear superiority and China's confirmed, imminent breakout as an equal or superior nuclear power, the United States must not only modernize its aging arsenal but expand into the advanta-

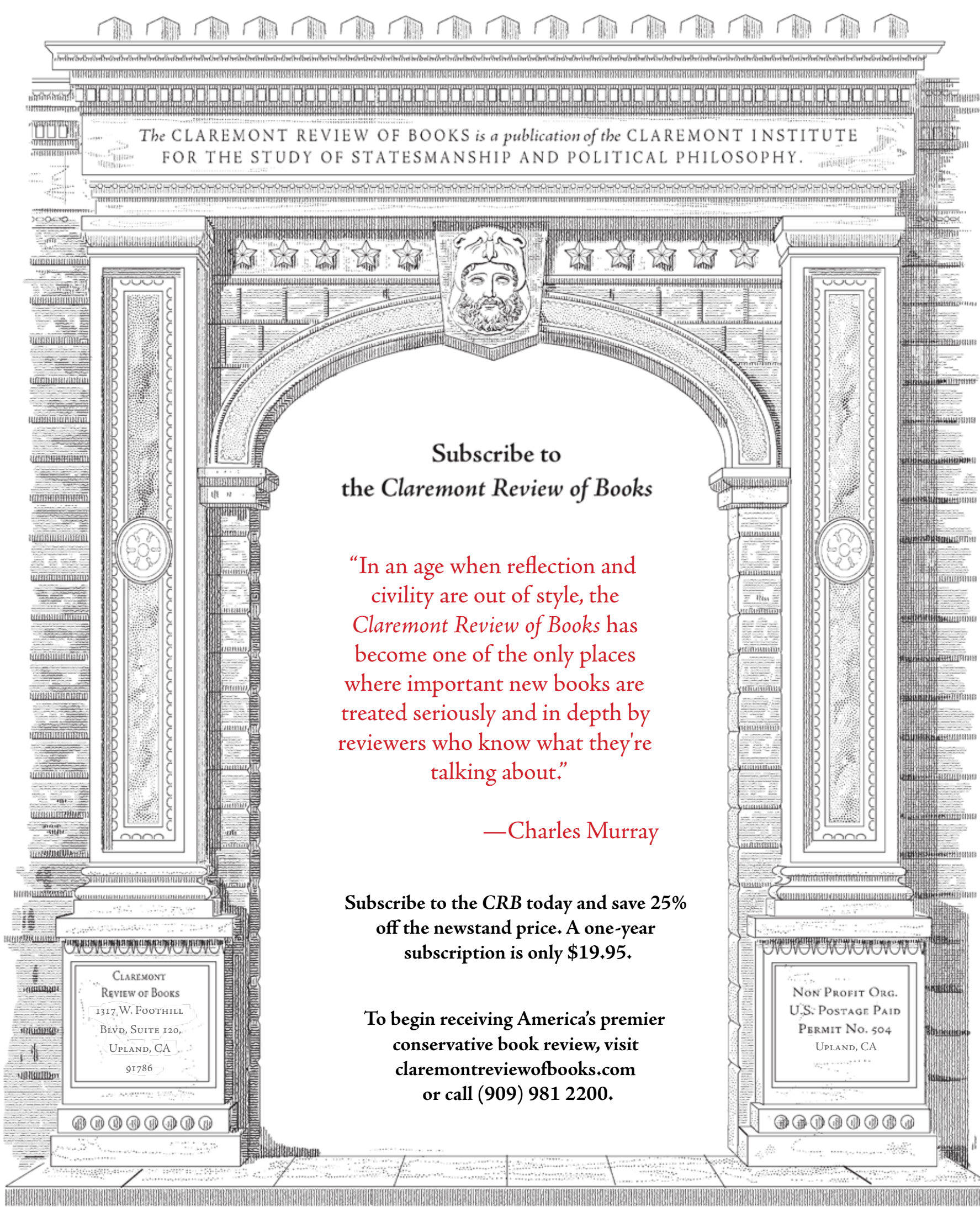
geous, stabilizing systems possessed not only by Russia and China but even by North Korea. More or less invulnerable rail- and road-mobile missiles that cannot be eliminated in a first strike are thus potent insurance against a first strike. They have them, we do not, and, unlike hypersonic glide vehicles, which they have and we do not, we have no plans for them, a scandalous dereliction of duty.

Missile defense is yet another deterrent to a first strike in that, although it will only partly protect cities, it will protect retaliatory capacity. Lastly, Russia's failures in Ukraine have strengthened its reliance upon escalate to de-escalate and the tactical nuclear weapons essential to that strategy. Such an approach is made more attractive to Russia if the United States has nothing with which to respond short of a strategic nuclear strike. But escalate to de-escalate can be suppressed if the United States deploys weapons of similar type to counter it. To its credit, the Trump Administration recognized the problem. The Biden Administration does not, and has canceled the programs that would solve it.

In sum, in context, and in perspective, the war in Ukraine would have been avoidable had the United States and NATO not accepted the drastic weakening of their various deterrent powers both nuclear and conventional, had the post-Cold War settlement been more ambitious and imaginative, and had the United States not gratuitously surrendered in Afghanistan and empowered Iran in the Middle East. The litany is long and the invitations to war and tragedy are many.

To avoid future wars in Europe, the Middle East, and the Pacific, we will have to return at least to the 5.7% that in the 20th century's last half was the peacetime average of GDP devoted to defense, which in 2021 would have yielded \$1.31 trillion, a 67% increase in military expenditures. Such a reversion to the norm is entirely feasible: as are preparations to secure the Western Hemisphere lest it soon become vulnerable to Chinese domination; returning in strength to Europe and the Middle East; attending to our nuclear forces and underdeveloped missile defenses; re-shoring strategic industries; reviving our energy independence; and turning our focus outward to a world that, though it always has been and will be replete with all God's dangers, will reward those who step forward to meet them.

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