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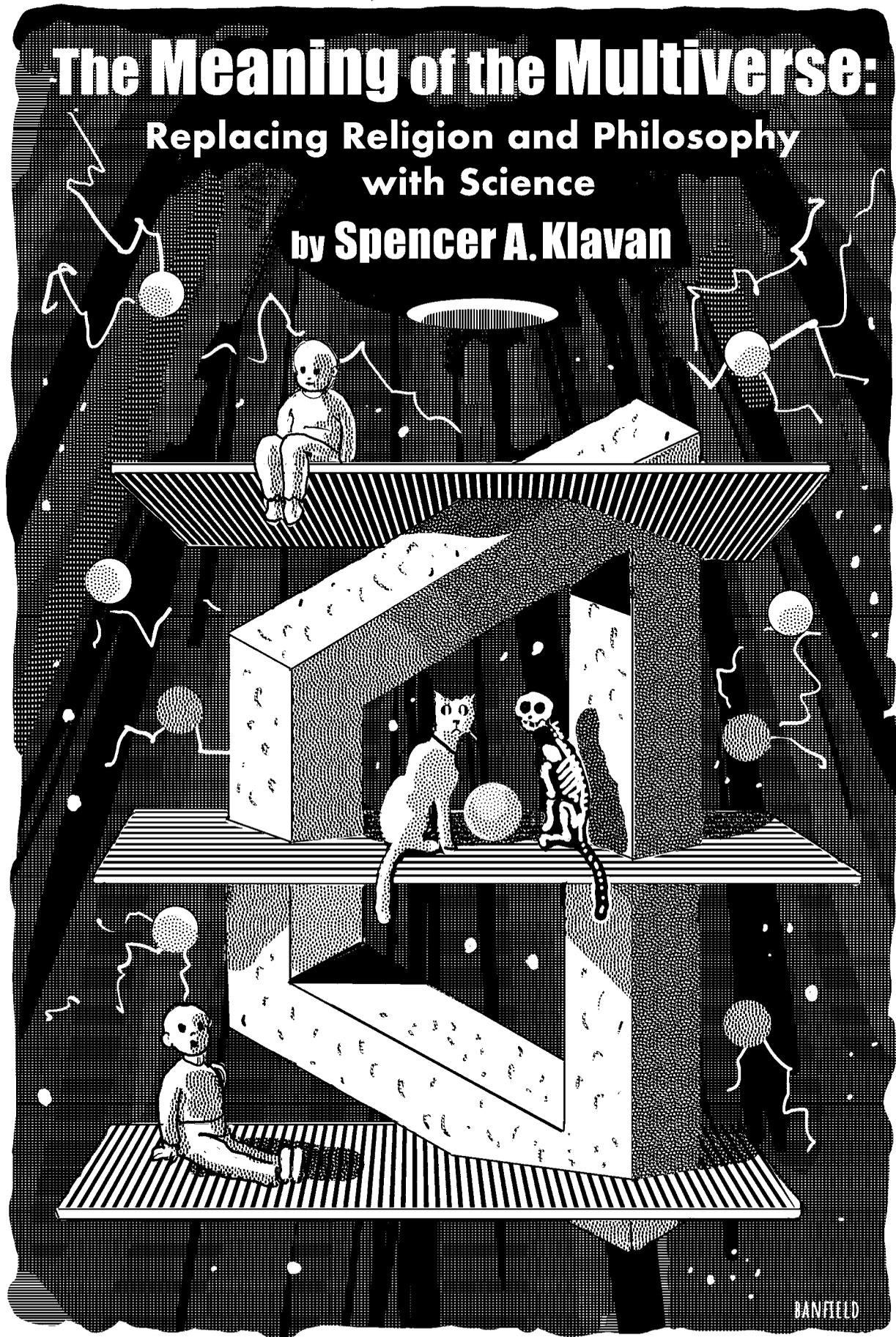
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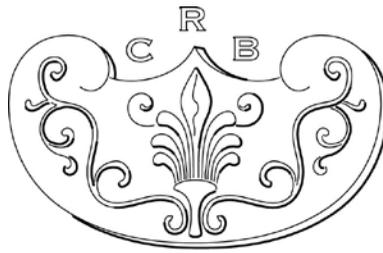
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Essay by Christopher Caldwell

WHY ARE WE IN UKRAINE?

A steep bill comes due for decades of democracy promotion.

ON MARCH 24, A MONTH AFTER Russian tanks rolled across Ukraine's borders, the Biden White House summoned America's partners (as its allies are now called) to a civilizational crusade. The administration proclaimed its commitment to those affected by Russia's recent invasion—"especially vulnerable populations such as women, children, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTQI+) persons, and persons with disabilities." At noon that same day, Secretary of State Antony Blinken tweeted about the "massive, unprecedented consequences" American sanctions were wreaking on Russia, and claimed Russia's economic "collapse" was imminent.

Never has an official non-belligerent been more implicated in a war. Russia and its sympathizers assert that the U.S. attempt to turn Ukraine into an armed anti-Russian camp is what the war is about in the first place. Even those who dismiss this view will agree that the United States has made itself a central player in the conflict. It is pursuing a three-pronged strategy to defeat Russia through every means short of entering the war—which, of course, raises the risk that the United States *will* enter the war. One prong is the state-of-the-art weaponry it is supplying to Ukraine. Since June, thousands of computer-guided artillery rockets have been wreaking havoc behind Russian lines. A second prong is sanctions. With western European help, Washington

has used its control of the choke points of the global marketplace to impoverish Russians, in hopes of punishing Russia. Finally, the U.S. seeks to rally the world's peoples to a culture war against an enemy whose traditionalism, even if it does not constitute the whole of his evil, is at least a symbol of it.

It would be foolish to bet against the United States, a mighty global hegemon with a military budget 12 times Russia's. Yet something is going badly off track. Russia's military tenacity was to be expected—bloodying and defeating more technologically advanced armies has been a hallmark of Russian civilization for 600 years. But the economic sanctions, far from bringing about the collapse Blinken gloated over, have driven up the price of the energy Russia sells, strengthened the ruble, and threatened America's western European allies with frostbite, shortages, and recession. The culture war has found few proponents outside of the West's richest latte neighborhoods. Indeed, cultural self-defense may be part of the reason India, China, and other rising countries have conspicuously declined to cut economic ties with the Russians.

There have been signs for years that a new Iron Curtain was about to drop on the European continent. In 2008, the U.S. announced plans to bring certain non-Baltic republics of the former Soviet Union—notably Ukraine and Georgia—into NATO and the American sphere of influence. Should Ukraine prevail in

this proxy war the U.S. will have succeeded, in a way. But it will have done so at an almost unspeakable price. It will have undermined the international economic architecture on which rests its control of global markets (and its ability to safely run government deficits). It will have carried out a shotgun wedding of Russia and China, forcing the most natural-resource-rich country on the planet into the arms of the West's most dangerous adversary. Should Ukraine fail, the Ukraine policy of the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations will be counted among the significant foreign policy blunders in American history.

Provoking Russia

THERE ARE BASICALLY TWO CONFLICTING explanations of how the United States got into this position—a practical/narrative one and a moral/psychological one. The first has been put forward by the University of Chicago foreign relations professor John Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer is skeptical of idealistic crusades, such as the one in Iraq that George W. Bush drew the country into in 2003. He is also skeptical of the idea that America has permanent moral commitments that transcend national interest, including the alliance America has maintained with Israel across the decades. To Mearsheimer, the American strategy of rights- and democracy-promotion since the end of the Cold

War appears largely foolish and self-defeating. On the one hand the architects of that policy hold Mearsheimer in low esteem—Bush and Trump advisors no less than Obama and Biden ones. On the other hand Mearsheimer has been, over the two decades since the Iraq invasion, far more often right than wrong. Mearsheimer has been laying out his explanation of the Ukraine conflict to packed lecture halls for almost a decade. One talk that he gave in Chicago in 2015 has been posted to YouTube and viewed 27 million times.

The impulse that culminated in the Iraq war did not end with the debacle there. Diplomats and defense experts were still trying to “spread democracy” even in the Bush Administration’s dying days. The key moment, in Mearsheimer’s view, came at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, when the American delegation put forward a statement that both Ukraine and Georgia “will become” NATO members. Both German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Nicolas Sarkozy warned the Bush Administration of the consequences. “I was very sure...that Putin was not going to just let that happen,” Merkel later explained. “From his perspective, that would be a declaration of war.”

More Americans than dared to say so felt the same. Mearsheimer cites William Burns, then-U.S. ambassador in Moscow, now President Biden’s director of central intelligence. Burns wrote a memo to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice:

Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin’s sharpest liberal critics I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests. NATO would be seen as throwing down the strategic gauntlet. Today’s Russia will respond. Russian-Ukrainian relations will go into a deep freeze. It will create fertile soil for Russian meddling in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

Russia was never without an excuse to meddle in Ukraine. The Ukrainians are an ancient people. But rather like the Kurds they inhabit a dangerous neighborhood, and for most of their modern history have been unable to found a real nation-state. Under Communism Ukraine became one of the Soviet socialist republics. This was an administrative

statehood, not a real sovereignty. Still, it was better than what they got in the decade after Communism fell. Living standards plummeted by 60%. Corruption rose to levels unique in Europe.

The cultural lines between Russia and Ukraine have always been blurry. They are fraternal peoples and arch-foes. They are, it seems, the entities for which the word “frenemy” was coined. In many parts of the country—notably the Crimean peninsula, with its ports and its centuries-old Russian naval bases, and in the eastern mining and manufacturing region called the Donbass—people feel themselves considerably more Russian than Ukrainian. In 1944 Stalin complicated the situation (or, by his lights, simplified it) when he deported the Muslim Tatars who had been resident there, primarily in Crimea, for centuries. Russian has for generations been the lingua franca of business and culture in Ukraine—although its public use has been suppressed since 2014.

That was a hinge year. Ukrainian diplomats had been negotiating an “association agreement” with the European Union that would have created closer trade relations. Russia outbid the E.U. with its own deal, which included \$15 billion in incentives for Ukraine. President Viktor Yanukovich signed it. Protests, backed by the United States, broke out in Kiev’s main square, the Maidan, and in cities across the country. By then the U.S. had spent \$5 billion to influence Ukraine’s politics, according to a 2013 speech by State Department official Victoria Nuland. Russia now viewed this activity as having funded subversion and revolt. Like every Ukrainian government since the end of the Cold War, Yanukovich’s government was corrupt. Unlike many of them it was legitimately elected. When shootings near the Maidan in Kiev left dozens of protesters dead, Yanukovich fled the country, and the United States played a central role in setting up a successor government.

Meddling with vital Russian interests at Russia’s doorstep turned out to be more dangerous than orating about democracy. Rather than see the Russophone and pro-Russian region of Crimea transformed from a Russian naval stronghold into an American one, Russia invaded it. “Took over” might be a better verb, because there was no loss of life due to the military operation. Whether the Russian takeover was a reaction to American crowding or an unprovoked invasion, one thing was clear: In Russia’s view, Ukraine’s potential delivery of Crimea to NATO was a more serious threat to its survival in 2014 than—to take an example—Islamic terrorism had been to America’s in 2001 or 2003. Understanding that Russia

would respond accordingly to any attempt to wrest it back, Russia’s European and Black Sea neighbors tended thenceforth to treat Crimea as a *de facto* part of Russia. So, for the most part, did the United States. The Minsk accords, signed by Russia and Ukraine, were meant to guarantee a measure of linguistic and political autonomy in the culturally Russian Donbass. (Russia claims the violation of these accords as a *casus belli*.)

Anyone who watched the first Trump impeachment in 2019 will know that U.S. Ukraine policy—and the personnel carrying it out—did not change, in its essence, between the Obama and Trump administrations. Through steady deliveries of weaponry and military know-how, the failed state of 2014, defended by a ramshackle collection of hooligans and oligarch-sponsored militias, was transformed by 2021 into the third-largest army in Europe, fully interoperable with that of the United States. Ukraine, with a quarter-million men under arms, was outmanned only by Turkey and Russia. The real caesura came not with Trump’s arrival but with his departure. In the first weeks of 2021, Joe Biden committed his administration to a considerably more aggressive Ukraine policy. Last November 10, Blinken signed a “strategic partnership” that not only reasserted the Bush Administration’s commitment to admit Ukraine into NATO, but also reopened contested sovereignty questions, including that of strategically vital, culturally Russian Crimea.

The Mearsheimer account culminates with an implicit question: What did you *think* Russia would do?

Putin and Partisanship

THERE IS, OF COURSE, A DIFFERENT explanation, the moral/psychological explanation put forward by the Biden administration and its defenders. It differs from Mearsheimer’s account not so much in facts as in its apportionment of moral blame. In this account, the spur to war was not American encroachment but the erratic behavior of Russian president Vladimir Putin.

There’s certainly nothing wrong with focusing on Putin. Since coming to power in 2000 he has been one of the defining political figures of our era. On the one hand he managed, if not to defeat the mafias who had taken over the “privatization” of the Soviet economy under Boris Yeltsin, then at least to loosen their hold on the state and make them somewhat accountable to the law, an achievement that proved beyond the leaders of Ukraine, for example. He revived an economy in which life expectancy had fallen to the level of Ban-

gladesh's, and for a few years presided over a Russia that was freer in most respects than it had been in a century. On the other hand, this was a Russia in which enemies of the regime were attacked and murdered, at home and abroad. Whether or not Putin is held personally accountable for these killings, they are a blot on his regime.

Putin certainly had reasons to wish Ukraine kept in Russia's sphere of influence. But in most Western accounts of what led to the invasion of Ukraine last February, these reasons are presented as psychopathological, not geostrategic. Putin comes off as Hitler. He wants to reconstitute the Soviet Union. Or the tsarist empire. He rides a horse bare-chested. "He gets support because he is perceived to be a strongman," Francis Fukuyama wrote on his blog in March. "What does he have to offer once he demonstrates incompetence and is stripped of his coercive power?" "He was very sexist towards me," Hillary Clinton recalled in an interview with the *Financial Times*, explaining Henry Kissinger's skepticism about the Biden Administration's Ukraine policy with the remark, "He values his relationship with Putin so much." On Capitol Hill, too, Putin has become a symbol and a pretext for partisan political maneuvering, notably in the Mueller investigation into alleged collusion between Russia and the Trump campaign in 2016.

But the worst thing about this psychomoral approach to Russian-Ukrainian affairs is that it produces bad foreign-policy thinking. It implies that, once you account for Putin's personality, the war is actually about nothing—at least nothing political. And if the war is about nothing, then there is no need to consider what brought it about or where it might be going.

Few people have paid attention to how rapidly Ukrainian society has been evolving since the Maidan protests. In a recent interview in the *New Left Review*, the sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko described a power bloc that has lately come into being, uniting Ukraine's globalizing oligarchs, Western-funded progressive foundations, and Ukrainian nationalists. The latter argued for ripping up the Minsk accords and ripping out the Russian roots of Ukrainian public life and high culture, leaving Ukraine with a hard-line form of political correctness. After 2014, according to Ishchenko, "a wide range of political positions supported by a large minority, sometimes even by the majority, of Ukrainians—sovereignist, state-developmental, illiberal, left-wing—were blended together and labeled 'pro-Russian narratives' because they challenged the dominant pro-Western, neoliberal and nationalist discourses

in Ukraine's civil society." Those who hold such views have often felt driven out of public life.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, today the symbol of resolute anti-Russian resistance, has himself undergone a transformation. An influential Ukrainian actor and TV producer, he won a landslide in 2019 on the promise he would render life tolerable for the Russia-friendly east. His popularity quickly eroded, according to Ishchenko, and shortly after the Biden inauguration, Zelensky began censoring Russo-ophile channels, websites, and blogs.

For years, Aleksei Arestovich, a young polymath who is among Zelensky's shrewdest and most voluble policy advisors, has been putting forward the idea that war with Russia is inevitable, and that it might even be in Ukraine's interest. Arestovich believes that Putin has a long-range plan to reconstitute something like the Soviet Union, and that "if we don't enter NATO, then it's the end for us." In 2019 he told an interviewer that "the cost of us getting into NATO will be a huge war with Russia."

Figuring out just how huge this war is going to be is the key to figuring out what the West should do next.

The Pivot of History

THOSE WHO BACK A BIGGER ROLE FOR the West in supporting Ukraine often put their position in the form of a question: once he gets control of Ukraine, why should Putin stop there? The question has a simple answer: because he knows something about history and he can count. He doesn't have the guns. He doesn't have the soldiers. Putin invaded Ukraine with 190,000 men. That is just slightly more than the 170,000 Soviet soldiers who died trying—and failing—to retake the city of Kharkov in 1942. There were *four* battles of Kharkov in World War II, and Kharkov was only one of the cities fought over.

Poltava, Sevastopol, the clashes Germany fought on the road to Stalingrad and Kursk... Ukraine has always been potentially the most violent spot on earth. As the strategist Halford Mackinder wrote at the turn of the 20th century, "European civilization is, in a very real sense, the outcome of secular struggle against Asiatic invasion." Ukraine is the place where those invasions can be stopped by a combination of wide, defensible rivers and massive conscript armies. Wars fought there tend to be world wars. That is why Mackinder called this part of the world "The Geographical Pivot of History." Former secretary of state Zbigniew Brzezinski used the same

"pivot" metaphor to describe Ukraine in his post-Cold War book *The Grand Chessboard* (1997). "Without Ukraine," he wrote, "Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire."

Reducing Russia's dimensions appears to be America's overriding war aim. It is a risky one. Those Western leaders with the ambition to bring Europe to the gates of Moscow have sometimes brought the warriors of the Eurasian steppes onto the streets of Paris and Berlin.

For more than a century, the United States has entered world conflicts as a *tertius gaudens*. After two adversaries have bled and exhausted each other, big advantages can be won with a relatively small expenditure of blood and treasure. In this case, the U.S. is making the entirety of its contribution to the Ukrainian war effort in treasure, none of it so far in blood. On top of the armament and training provided over the past eight years, it has provided Ukraine with \$50 billion worth of advanced weaponry in the last six months. Since the beginning of the war, the United States has also provided targeting information for drone strikes on Russian generals and missile attacks on Russian ships.

The American course comes with obvious moral temptations. Traditionally, danger is allied to conscience in dissuading statesmen from overreach. Any statesman with the ambition to dominate, plunder, or instruct another people is faced, sooner or later, with the question of how many of his own nation's sons he is willing to sacrifice for the purpose. For the past quarter-century the United States has been able to fight significant wars that do not put many of its youth in the line of fire. Conspicuous in this respect was the only previous interstate war fought on the European continent since World War II. The 1999 Kosovo War was an American air campaign against a Serbia that had inadequate air defenses. U.S. bombers were able to hit Belgrade for weeks while suffering no casualties. A country that can fight wars on these terms has the liberty to fight wars over practically anything.

The Ukraine war is special, though. American immunity from danger may be illusory. The progress of technology has imperceptibly eroded a longstanding distinction between supporting a combatant and entering the fray as a combatant oneself. In June, the U.S. began providing Ukraine with M142 HIMARS computer-targeted rocket artillery systems, and these present the problem in an acute form: the role of technology in the lethality of a weapon has grown to the point where the role of the human warrior is, relatively speaking, rendered negligible. An

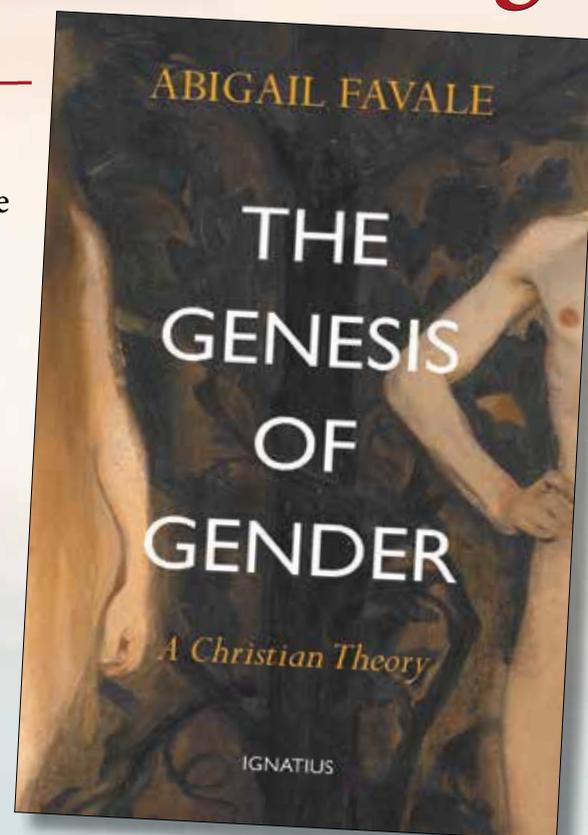
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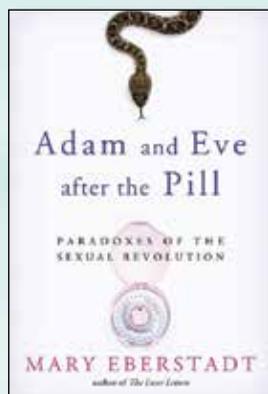
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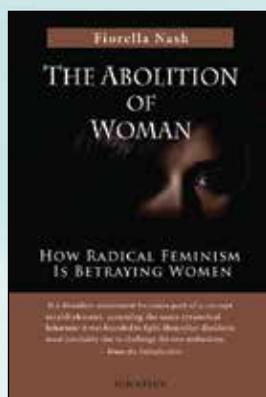


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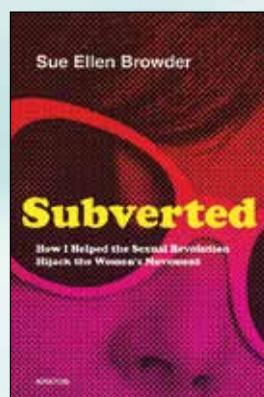


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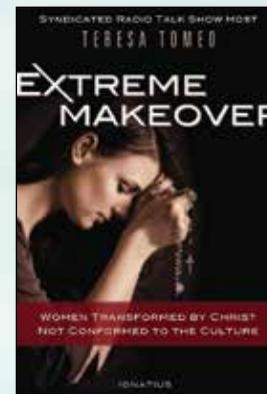


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encounter with a sword is an encounter with a swordsman. An encounter with an arrow is an encounter with an only slightly more distant Bowman. But an encounter with an M31 rocket fired from a HIMARS launcher is an encounter with General Dynamics. And it is the human warrior who is the repository of all the longings-to-be-vindicated and the sacrifices-freely-undertaken that consecrate war as a *cause*. With advanced weaponry, the soldier operating it almost doesn't need to be there. Which is to say that, in this proxy war between Russia and the United States, Ukraine doesn't need to be there. In these HIMARS artillery strikes, in the assassinations by drone of Russian officers, in the sinking of naval ships with advanced missiles, it is the United States, not Ukraine, that has become the battlefield adversary of Russia.

The offer by SpaceX CEO Elon Musk early in the war to provide Ukrainians with his company's Starlink satellite communications system has been written up in the Western press as practically an act of philanthropy. In June, the political consultant Ian Bremmer called SpaceX, Microsoft, and Google "literal belligerents in the war," and even professed himself hopeful about the world they were creating, observing that corporations and banks have "a hell of a lot more impact in what the global outlook on climate will be than any government." But this brave new world will not be a stable one. A "literal belligerent" is a legitimate target. In China, reportedly, the People's Liberation Army is studying "soft and hard kill methods" for taking Starlink's system down. What is more, if an entity has a "hell of a lot more impact" on policy issues than a government, then it *is* a government, no matter what you call it, and probably a government that is the more dangerous and irresponsible for being able to pretend it is something else. There are a bunch of questions here that have not even been raised, let alone addressed.

The New Economic Warfare

AMERICAN POLICYMAKERS HAVE CHOSEN this moment to launch a similarly novel system of economic warfare, which they expect to be just as effective as battlefield warfare while generating none of battlefield warfare's hard feelings.

The U.S. has cut off all Russian imports of energy, and has encouraged its European allies—thus far with only limited success—to do the same. The whole sanctions package is intended to be of an unprecedented destructiveness. American Deputy Treasury Secretary Adeyemo, the administration's

point man on sanctions, says that President Biden's order is to "make sure that we maximize the pain on Russia...degrading Russia's energy production capabilities," in order to "further starve them of the resources they need to conduct the kind of wars they are doing today." French economics minister Bruno LeMaire adds, "We will provoke the collapse of the Russian economy."

Sanctions invariably inflict their worst damage not on society's leaders but on common people. In a sanctions regime, starving a people "of resources," as Adeyemo puts it, is usually done by starving them, full stop. That is why blockades are traditionally considered acts of war. If something is more effective than a weapon, then it *is* a weapon. For sanctions to work effectively, they need to be imposed on a country that is democratic enough for the targeted population to make its own discomfort felt by the targeted government. That population must also be disinclined to reflexive patriotism—otherwise sanctions will backfire, and strengthen enemy morale. Sanctions, in other words, work best where the ethical case

The attempt to isolate Russia from the American world system has had a striking unintended consequence.

for sanctions is weakest. These practical dilemmas and moral paradoxes have come up again and again whenever sanctions are proposed, whether on Cuba, Iran, or Iraq.

What is new and reckless about these American sanctions is the threat they pose not to Russia but to the United States. The Biden Administration has been abusing—and thus undermining—the American position as custodian of the global economy.

Financial weapons, like battlefield weapons, change in nature as they become more technologically advanced. It didn't used to be possible to impose a watertight financial embargo. But now the weapon exists, and the United States, which has not received proper training in using it, is waving it around like a barroom drunk. In May, at American urging, Russia was cut off from the private-but-universal Brussels-based SWIFT system, which for the past 50 years has become the highway of international bank transfers and payments. Later that month, Janet Yellen's Treasury Department froze all of Russia's payments to its American bondholders and in late June de-

clared Russia to be in default—an act of regulatory chicanery that does nothing to taint Russia's real creditworthiness but does taint the United States' reputation for integrity as a neutral global-economy regulator.

The United States has led seven Western countries in freezing the hard currency reserves of the Russian central bank—roughly \$284 billion. Similar things have been done before—the United States froze Iran's assets after its 1979 revolution, releasing most of them two years later. (A certain amount remained outstanding until Barack Obama's "Iran deal" in 2016.) In the wake of the 2021 U.S. retreat from Afghanistan, the Biden Administration froze \$7 billion of the country's reserves—and then set aside half of them as a pool that could be tapped in damage suits connected to the 9/11 World Trade Center attack.

The measures against Russia, though, are of unprecedented scope. Both President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken have declared their willingness to *seize* those hundreds of billions in order to "rebuild Ukraine." The United States has for a long time lived off the "exorbitant privilege" of its reserve currency and its role as the global regulator of first resort. Neither will survive for long if the United States manages the world's assets in a non-fiduciary way.

Despite having bankers like Adeyemo in its top ranks, the Biden Administration appears to have forgotten this. It seems to believe Russia will just suck up the insults and inconvenience to which it is being subjected. Even if Russia had the best will in the world, it could not. Once its dollar reserves were seized and it was cut off from all means of transferring money and paying its debts in dollars, Russia asked for payment in rubles from the countries to which it exports gas. European members of the G7—the club of the richest Western democracies—called the request "unacceptable," and a "weaponization" of energy resources. But how can a business accept payment in a currency it is not allowed to spend? Europe quickly, if quietly, agreed.

The people who make U.S. Ukraine policy were apparently incapable of thinking things through to this point. Rather than beg its way back into the U.S.-led global financial order, the Russians are trying to build a new one with new partners. They have a chance of pulling it off. In a speech at a June economic forum in St. Petersburg, Putin complained that the roughly \$10 trillion that any trading country must hold in dollar and Euro currency reserves is being devalued at 8% a year by U.S. inflation. "Moreover," he said, "they can be confiscated or stolen any time if the United



States dislikes something in the policy of the states involved.” Putin called for a replacement for the SWIFT system. “The development of a convenient and independent payment infrastructure in national currencies is a solid and predictable basis for deepening international cooperation,” he said. Until recently such an appeal would have fallen on deaf ears. This time it did not.

Power and Influence

COMPLICATIONS AND ESCALATIONS may arise out of the Ukraine war. One dreads that they will. But thus far, the war’s most important world-historical consequence has been the failure of the United States to rally a critical mass of what it used to call “the world community” to repel Russia’s contestation of the American-built world system.

In part, the great story we see playing out is the fulfillment of a prediction that people have been making for a generation: power and influence are shifting away from the United States and Europe, and toward Asia. In the 1990s, when the United States was imposing its will on Iraq and Kosovo, the G7 made up 70% of the world economy. Today it makes up 43%. India and China are both giant export markets for Russian oil and gas. It is clear why Russia would want to sell to India and China. The more complicated question is why India (tacitly) and China (explicitly) would back Russia against what American progressives call the “rules-based international order.”

In 2020, the Hamburg-based Körber Foundation took a poll of German adults in their twenties and early thirties, and found that 46% backed closer ties between their country and China, versus only 35% who called for closer ties with the United States. In Italy, 36% of adults wanted ties to China, versus only 30% to the U.S. The difference may reflect that the United States is, on the international level, a police power. The U.S. not only claims a role in Russia’s near abroad; eight years ago it threatened to boycott Russia’s Olympics over its laws about teaching sexuality to schoolchildren. China (to take one example) made no such boycott threats. Post-Brexit, Britain is trying to adjust the trade regime with Ireland that is laid out in the Northern Ireland Protocol. The

Biden Administration and Nancy Pelosi have warned them of consequences if they do. India (to take one example) does not think British-Irish relations are its business.

A guarantor of economic order, the United States has come to mistake itself for a promulgator of international law, able to consign any country, at any time, to the status of an international pariah. Rival great powers see the United States actively engaged in undermining them, and sometimes they are right to. In early June, the *Wall Street Journal* covered trade secretary Gina Raimondo’s attempts to negotiate the so-called Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) with a number of Eastern countries, excluding China. The United States was reportedly offering little to its trade partners, certainly not the opening of U.S. domestic markets. In fact, to read between the lines of Raimondo’s explanation, the U.S. delegation was less interested in a trade agreement than in a penal code that could be wielded against China:

Rather than unilaterally bar the export of U.S. technology to Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, the U.S. “convinced 36 other countries to align their own export controls with us,” Ms. Raimondo said. That, she said, could be the model for the IPEF. “We’re going to have a whole negotiation around export controls for semiconductors. It would be very powerful if we had some number of countries in that region aligning their own systems with us.... If something like [Russia’s] invasion happened, you would be able to swiftly move with your allies the way we did within the Russia situation.”

Yes, the West “swiftly moved” against Russia, but six months in, these moves seemed surprisingly ineffective. The reason is that, no matter where you place the fulcrum and the lever, Russia, China, and India collectively are now too much for the United States to lift. Inducements can be offered to get one country to break solidarity with the other two. But cooperating would be foolish, on any terms. At the end of the day, a country that permits itself to be isolated by the United States this way is increasing the risk that it will itself be subjected to a media-and-boycott campaign of destruction like the one we are now witnessing with Russia. A few

words about the condition of the Uyghurs, a few talking points on Hindu nationalism, and the U.S. can crank this whole machinery of economic destruction into operation against China or India. They know it, too. The Italian writer Marco D’Eramo reported that, after a March 18 phone call between Biden and Xi Jinping, one Chinese anchor-man joked that Biden’s message had been: “Can you help me fight your friend so that I can concentrate on fighting you later?”

The attempt to isolate Russia from the American world system has had a striking unintended consequence—the possible founding of an *alternative* world system that would draw power away from the existing one. Twenty years ago, under George W. Bush, the United States removed the Iraqi deterrent from Iran’s neighborhood, transforming Iran overnight into a regional power. This year, under Joe Biden, the United States has made China a gift of Russia’s exportable food and mineral resources. We are displaying an outright genius for identifying our most dangerous military adversary and solving its most pressing strategic challenge. The attention of China is now engaged. Joe Biden argues that any wavering in the cause of obliterating Russia will be understood by China as a green light on Taiwan. He may have a point, but the U.S. management of the Ukraine situation over the past decade has constituted encouragement enough.

Administration officials often describe Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a war of choice. Although this may have been true at the outset, it is not now. Vladimir Putin and the Russia he rules cannot stop fighting. As long as the United States is involved in arming Russia’s enemies and bankrupting its citizens, they are quite right to believe themselves in a war for their country’s survival. The United States, thus far in a less bloody way, is also involved in a war it chose but cannot exit—in this case, for fear of undermining the international system from which it has drawn its power and prosperity for the past three quarters of a century.

Now may seem like the wrong moment to make peace. But seldom in wars such as this one do the prospects for peace grow more favorable with time.

Christopher Caldwell is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books and the author, most recently, of The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties (Simon & Schuster).

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