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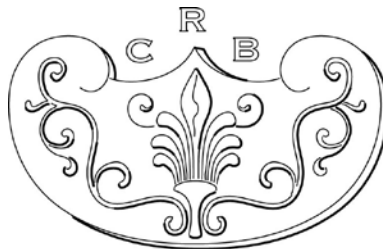


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THE DISPUTED QUESTION



## AGAINST THE NEW REPUBLICAN ISOLATIONISM

by Mark Helprin

**I**BELIEVE THAT WITH REGARD TO MICHAEL Anton's essay "Nuclear Autumn" (Fall 2022), it is necessary to offer a counterpoint to its portrayal of, and the lessons it derives from, the Missile Crisis of 1983, in which I was a minor participant but a close observer. Now unjustly obscure, this was the last great struggle of the Cold War. The Soviet aim was not only to achieve and maintain an unmatched nuclear advantage via the deployment of the SS-20 intermediate-range ballistic missiles menacing Europe, but, more importantly, to convince the West that having provoked this action and thus bearing the guilt, it had better not react, as doing so would be yet a greater provocation that might lead to nuclear Armageddon. Fought in the hearts and minds of Western populations, the battle was a political crisis that willfully and for effect was passed off by one side as a military crisis. The conclusion was hardly certain, but as Ronald Reagan might have said: we won, they lost.

Like Gaul, my counterpoint is divided into three parts.

### Between the Extremes

**F**IRST, A MODERN, CONVENTIONAL WAR is raging between Russia, a nuclear-armed, inherently unstable superpower, and Ukraine, a much smaller,

conventionally armed buffer state informally associated with NATO countries that, absent any treaty obligations other than the defunct Budapest Memorandum, increasingly afford it material and diplomatic support. To what extent is this war capable of spreading to central and western Europe, drawing in NATO, and/or going nuclear?

The answer to this question is complicated by the fact that it is approached on its extremes by advocates aligned with rapidly hardening political positions tangential or even irrelevant to the action as it unfolds. On the one hand are the capitulationists, who see insufficient reason to intervene, refuse to project the consequences of a Russian victory, or are simply terrified of escalation, nuclear or otherwise. These motives are often strengthened by an expressed desire to divert military spending to domestic use, and the libertarian view of a world far safer than the tragedies of either history or the present confirm.

On the other are those who take reckless, self-referential pride in damning the torpedoes. They are insufficiently impressed by—or aware of—Russia's perseverance, paranoia, and history of invasion; its nuclear arsenal; its famously permissive nuclear doctrine; and its unstable, opaque governance by a vulnerable autocrat dependent upon shifting coalitions of warlords, oligarchs, gangsters, and mys-

tic ideologues. As Russia is neither the dull Soviet Union of old nor a modern Western democracy professing humane values, it is capable of rash, unpredictable acts.

Although middle courses are often no more than fruitless compromises dictated by the weaknesses of contending positions and endowed with the disadvantages of each, in this case a walk between the extremes would disallow Russian victory (and all that would follow as Europe and Asia are subject to further assault by emboldened dictatorships) and simultaneously avoid pushing Russia beyond its true red lines to a place of desperation where its accepted doctrine emphatically tells it that it may resort to nuclear weapons.

Russian nuclear strategies are a lot more flexible than ours, but in some respects that are now pertinent they are not all that dissimilar. Both envision, though with different thresholds, the use of tactical nuclear weapons to counter the conventional invasion of national territories. This customary guidance, however, is made newly volatile due to Russia's claim as its own of ground that recently was Ukraine's, and to Russia's large inventory, dwarfing NATO's, of tactical nuclear weapons readily integrated into its conventional echelons.

A central question in "Nuclear Autumn"—whether taking on nuclear risk is justifiable

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“over...the Donbass?”—neither has been answered in the affirmative nor is applicable to the current situation, as developments thus far have shown. Nor is it a valid impeachment of the West’s policy at present. But it may yet be applicable, and as such suggests a course of action no doubt unsatisfactory to both extremes in the debate over Ukraine. It is, however, what I—and doubtless, for all the influence we have, other singing mice (and also France’s President Macron as well as, presumably, unnamed, reticent heads of state)—have had in mind since the beginning.

That is, the West should not share in Ukraine’s oft-stated aim (necessary to lay out a negotiating position and stiffen morale) of restoring the whole of its territory. It is likely that, despite their declarations, the leaders of NATO and President Zelensky himself understand this, as they immediately face and are perilously subject to the forces of reality. We don’t know if Ukraine will ever be in a position to drive into the Crimea or the solidified Russian cantons in Ukraine’s east. Nor do we know who would be in control of Russia at such a time. One thing, however, is clear. If the Russian state is on the verge of collapse, or if Russia is about to be pushed out of the territories it has held since 2014—especially the Crimea—it will seriously consider a tactical nuclear option. Thus, a settlement derived of force alone that cedes the Crimea and a portion of Ukraine’s east, tragic as it may be for tragedy-rich Ukraine, seems the only feasible course. So the answer to the question is, fairly obviously (as no doubt intended), no. But the question as it is presented is not applicable to support of Ukraine up to this point and as it now stands.

To answer the potential objection that a settlement would afford Russia a long breath before resuming its conquests, it seems quite clear that unlike the weak response to, and therefore encouragement of, Russia’s serial aggressions prior to 2022, the West would have to, and would be likely to, embark upon a program of immensely strengthening both NATO’s and Ukraine’s military capacities so as to deter another invasion. Although given the ongoing suicide of the West, this is not guaranteed, there was indeed a sea change in Europe when it felt the winds of war close in the east.

What if Ukraine crosses the red lines I have sketched above, or if, surprisingly and without pretext, Russia turns to nuclear weapons, as cannot be ruled out? Anton echoes the common misconception that this would lead to catastrophic nuclear warfare. It might, which is one reason for nations always to make every effort not to turn to nuclear weapons. But would it? Russia’s strategy of “escalate to de-

escalate,” as risky as it is, is premised upon nuclear use primarily as a signal. That would be, for example, the detonation of a very low-yield weapon on or over a sparsely populated area of Ukraine.

What would be the result of such an outrage, especially given the unavoidable casualties? Not, for sure, even a limited nuclear response, or a punitive, conventional attack upon Russia itself, both of which would open the gates to uncontrollable escalation. Rather, NATO would put its vastly superior economies, military establishments, and collective population on a war footing to deter further Russian adventurism. Its three nuclear powers would heavily reinforce their deterrent strategic arsenals and set up missile defenses. The civilized world would sanction the Russian economy such as never before, and Russia’s friends would, if not desert it, pull away and keep their distance.

Putin knows this, as do most of his generals. But Yevgeny Prigozhin and Ramzan Kadyrov—two bandits of a type that *in extremis* might succeed him—may not, which is why, whereas the West must not be unduly afraid of Russian nuclear use, it must not fail to discipline itself so as not to make it likely. Not to be unduly afraid means to continue to support Ukraine so that it is not pushed back from current lines and may yet advance varying beyond them to establish more defensible positions. Not to fail in discipline means to establish war aims in view of and limited by the potential for uncontrollable escalation. Such a dual approach requires the rejection of extremes in favor of the careful calibration of objectives and support. It would be very dangerous were the ship to list too far to port or too far to starboard.

### Play in the Joints

SECOND, THE PROXY WARS OF THE COLD War were similar to the Ukraine War now, in that, to take two examples, the U.S. was actively fighting in Vietnam while Russia and China supplied the North with materiel and even advisors, and Russia was fighting in Afghanistan while the U.S. supported the Mujahidin. These notably hot wars did not escalate to direct conflict among their sponsors. And in consideration of what appears to be the central thesis in “Nuclear Autumn,” to what extent is the current situation comparable to the 1983 Missile Crisis, and how close then did we come in general to a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, to a Soviet-American conflict, to a nuclear demonstration, or even to either a tactical or strategic nuclear war?

Anton makes use of the era’s standard operating procedures, as well as the particular responses with which the West navigated the Missile Crisis, in aid of the implicit argument that the United States and its allies should withdraw or drastically curtail their support of Ukraine. The purported wisdom of such a historical overview dovetails perfectly with the swelling isolationist impulses of the populist, in-your-face but proudly wobbly GOP and, despite the small circulation of the CRB, might through the latter’s disproportionate influence serve as an ideological template for action in the surreal disaster that is Washington.

To make use of one of Thomas Sowell’s favorite expressions, if we are to be serious about evidence, it is wrong on almost every major point. Drawing from the considerable inventory of fallacies, for example, in regard to what is deemed the Reagan Administration’s “PsyOps” and in Anton’s essay is prejudicially associated with the Reichstag fire, Lord Haw-Haw, and Tokyo Rose: “Mere days into Reagan’s presidency,” these “included sneaking American submarines into Soviet waters where they would suddenly surface near a critical military installation, hang around long enough to be seen, and then submerge and bug out.”

How many days is not specified, but such a mission would require careful advanced planning and clearance. What is meant by “Soviet waters?” Warships are allowed innocent passage through territorial waters. And were “Soviet waters” the much broader exclusive economic zones? How close to critical military installations? The appearance of submarines in close proximity to shore was neither new nor exclusive to the U.S., as Sweden can confirm even today. In 1958, I myself was present when between Martha’s Vineyard and Nantucket a Soviet submarine surfaced like a great, mysterious whale and then returned to the deep. The object of penetration missions that did trespass into Soviet military areas was not provocation but intelligence gathering while avoiding detection, which would have compromised further missions and might have been fatal.

“Somewhat more unnerving to the Kremlin was the practice of flying highly visible B-52s [prior to stealth aircraft, all strategic bombers were highly visible, the B-52 only marginally more so] on what looked like bombing runs.” Long common practice, these were training missions partly to gauge response, and they were routine to both powers rather than a sudden provocation attributable to the Reagan Administration. I know that these flights were established



practice, because I witnessed one ten years before Reagan was elected.

Along the same lines, Anton misinterprets the potential use of nuclear-armed aircraft flying from American carriers toward the USSR. In the early Cold War an important part of the American nuclear deterrent was tactical aircraft armed with nuclear weapons and stationed not only on carriers but on land. This continued into the '80s. Naval exercises during the Reagan Administration stressing this capability were in response to an imbalance in Soviet throw weight in the deployment of, for example, the SS-18 (for which the United States had no counterpart), and in response to Soviet "Bear" bombers practicing cruise-missile attack runs toward Alaska. Contrary to what is perhaps unwittingly suggested via imprecise language—"Carrier battle groups repeatedly probed Soviet defenses, launching waves of aircraft to overfly Soviet bases"—these aircraft (which were neither U-2 nor SR-71 high-altitude surveillance craft) did not overfly Soviet bases or even enter Soviet airspace. *Among other things*, this could have started World War III.

It is highly misleading to characterize military exercises and maneuvers as provocations. Common to both sides then and now, these are and were observed, limited, and understood. In the nuclear era, when adversaries are aware of their vulnerability to rapid and total destruction, satellite and electronic surveillance provided even 40 years ago a lot more play in the joints than was common prior to World War I, when mobilizations were often inflammatory, as history confirms.

#### An Urban Legend

“NUCLEAR AUTUMN” ATTEMPTS TO make the case that in 1983 the West was unusually provocative, and, by inference, that it is so today. Among errors—such as those above—derived from inexact knowledge of military operations, one stands out, as it is the cornerstone of the assertion that Soviet actions (specifically the deployment of the SS-20) were defensive and reactive. That is: not only did the Soviets fear a first strike, but, were it not for the heroic action of a Soviet lieutenant colonel, the U.S. and the USSR might have tumbled into a general nuclear exchange. Why? Because a Russian radar mistakenly showed five incoming U.S. ballistic missiles—possibly wild geese, possibly clouds, possibly electronic malfunction.

The story goes that had the colonel, Stanislav Petrov, reported the sighting, the Soviets, conditioned by the overly aggressive behavior

of the West as Anton asserts, would, according to the standard doctrine of both powers, have launched on warning. Thus, he was cinematically immortalized as *The Man Who Saved the World* (2014)...except that he didn't. How do we know this?

We know it because, at the time, neither power was capable of either a successful first strike or of defending against the inevitable retaliatory strike that would follow such an attempt. We and they were well aware of this. We and they, however, were—had to be—prepared to counter even vain attempts, and this manifested itself in the launch-on-warning policy. But the circumstances in which Petrov supposedly saved the world would not have led to that, and the story, which conveniently fits Soviet and Russian encouragement of unilateral disarmament movements, is more like an urban legend than something upon which to build either an understanding of events at the time or the approach to European security now.

Hundreds of missiles at once might have been an insane (and useless) attempt to eliminate Soviet retaliatory capacity, but not five, or even 50, and anyone acquainted with the tech-

It would be very  
dangerous were the ship  
to list too far to port or  
starboard.

nicalities—most pertinently Lieutenant Colonel Petrov, his superiors, and senior defense officials—would have known this. Specifically:

*Detection.* From "Nuclear Autumn:" "According to Bruce Blair, [t]he top leadership, given only a couple of minutes to decide, told that an attack had been launched, would make a decision to retaliate." No. Not for many reasons. One, false alarms, technological and otherwise, were not unusual. Two, this report, of the apparently desultory, unevenly spaced launch of only five missiles, was generated by one radar. The Soviets had 7,000 warning systems, of which nine were ICBM/SLBM (intercontinental/submarine-launched ballistic missile) launch-detection satellites, three were long-range, backscatter, over-the-horizon missile detection radars, and, following on these, a large number of complementary systems arrayed at 6,000- and 2,800-kilometer ranges. A universal characteristic of nuclear operations, theirs and ours, is redundancy and concurrence. Unsupported by multiple, varied types of detection—i.e., no concurrence—the report from one site, especially given the nature of

the sightings, would not have been the cause of retaliation.

*Impossibility of a Successful First Strike.* With the later development of precision guidance, a successful nuclear first strike became, if neither wise nor guaranteed, more plausible. But not in 1983. To hit the Soviets' 1,298 ICBM silos, the United States had roughly 3,900 missile-delivered warheads with the accuracy for the objective, assuming all missiles would be launched, which they would not have been. (Additionally, some classes of missile were deliberately made precise enough for only countervalue retaliation: i.e., cities and infrastructure rather than hardened targets.) Subjecting this warhead stock to calculations of circular error probable (CEP) reduces the effective number to 2,251, or 1.7 warheads per silo.

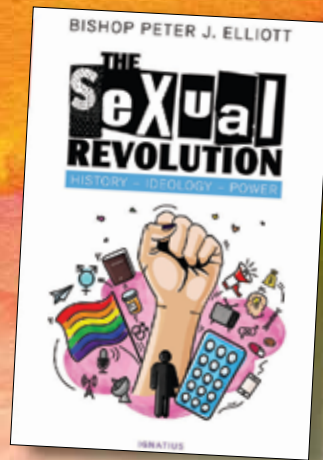
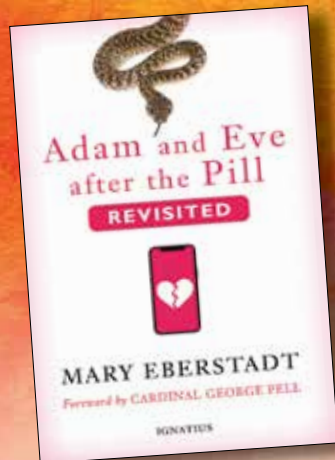
Roughly only half of those that did strike within the 200-meter CEP of the Minuteman II and III missiles (the Poseidon SLBMs were reserved as noted above) might be close enough to kill the silo. This is an estimate, but if to the persistent structural problems of accuracy one adds further obstacles such as launch, propulsion, guidance, and MIRV (multiple, independently targetable reentry vehicle) failure; Soviet missile defenses (even if only 32 interceptors); weather (which can blow a missile off course); and imponderable silo resistance and survivability, it seems reasonable to reduce the 1.7 warheads per silo to .8, which—long before American bombers could fight their ways through thick Soviet air defenses—would leave 260 potentially intact Soviet land-based missiles to launch against American cities and infrastructure.

In addition, however many of the 980 SLBMs in however many of the 80 Soviet SSBNs (ballistic nuclear submarines) that were already at sea might escape from port and would have survived U.S. attack submarines, plus the Soviet Union's 143 long-range bombers sortieing against hardly adequate North American air defenses, would make an American first strike suicidal. And that is not to mention the 400 Soviet intermediate-range missiles, of which 360 were mobile and more or less untargetable, and which, as a macabre side dish, could have destroyed western Europe.

Anyone with any sense will realize the immense uncertainty of all the calculations above, which, failing a further explication of 20,000 more words, are not here drilled down as far as they can go. But the more you drill down, the greater the uncertainty, and the inherent characteristic of uncertainty perhaps more than anything else served to caution force planners, targeters, and (I say this



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loosely) statesmen. We knew this, and the Soviet leadership knew and experienced it. They knew as well, despite their insecurity and paranoia, that we had no motive for a first strike. And of course they knew that the anti-nuclear protestors didn't know it, and didn't want to know it.

Now, take the figures above and substitute for the full American arsenal a mere 1%—five missiles—launched in a desultory pattern and picked up by only one of many Soviet warning systems. How real was the possibility of a first strike, and thus how real is the story?

*Decapitation.* The last trench for the argument that the Soviets may have retaliated to geese or, heeding Aristophanes, the clouds is that even five missiles might have constituted a decapitation strike. First, we were not and could not have been fully confident of the locations or communications of the Soviet leadership and command authorities. Second, given the reduction of efficiencies as treated above, in effect the incoming potential would have been far less than that of five missiles at face value. Third, a nuclear strike on command and control in Moscow would have been countervalue as well, ensuring full retaliation and thus negating whatever the limiting potential of decapitation. Fourth, unlike Washington, Moscow was protected by the aforementioned 32 anti-ballistic missile interceptors. And, fifth, the USSR's land-based missile forces had 300 control centers, and each of its 80 ballistic missile submarines was to some extent semi-autonomous as well. In nuclear warfare, decapitation is not a viable option.

Other misconceptions throughout Anton's essay create a picture of high instability. For example, the assertion that the Soviets feared "that the United States would use SDI [the Strategic Defense Initiative, i.e., missile defense, pejoratively, "Star Wars"] as a shield behind which to launch a first strike."

Perhaps someday in the future it will be possible to construct a truly impervious anti-ballistic-missile shield that will protect both counterforce and countervalue targets, but no such thing is possible just yet and in the early '80s it was absolutely clear to proponents and opponents alike that it was purely aspirational. Even in the future should such a system prove 90% effective, using current inventories as a base for calculation it would allow Russia's surviving 50 strategic missiles, with many more warheads, to lay waste to American cities and infrastructure. How, therefore, could missile defense shield a first strike? It could not. What then was—and will be into the future—the purpose of missile defense?

Precisely the opposite of its detractor's claim that it will lead to instability by shielding a first strike, it promotes stability by protecting retaliatory capacity. That is, the mirror image of what is detailed immediately above. If an enemy first strike attempts to eliminate American nuclear capacity, and missile defense counters not 90% but even only 10% of the attack, the preserved retaliatory capacity would still be enough to deter a first strike, even accounting for an enemy defense that would by some measure degrade the retaliation. And it is likely that with all the other difficulties of a counterforce strike even in this era of enhanced precision, much more than 10% of our retaliatory capacity would remain. Missile defense discourages rather than encourages a first strike. Despite what Anton presents, we knew this, and the Soviets knew it.

The tenor of "Nuclear Autumn" is revealed in its characterization of the response to the roll out of the SS-20s as "anti-Soviet alarmism," when it was not only a logical and balanced response but, as proved in the pudding, 100% successful. And by its mischaracterization of Herman Kahn as a Dr. Strangelove. This was, and is, the Hollywood conception of the work of people who took upon themselves the unpleasant responsibility of thinking about the unthinkable. Hollywood and the Left have always refused to think about the unthinkable, and it shows.

### What Is Ultimately at Stake

**T**HIRD, WHAT BEARING DOES ALL THIS have on the Republican Party's new—or, better, jumping back a (my) lifetime, regurgitated—isolationism, in which the defense conceptions of Marjorie Taylor Greene and Ilhan Omar come together at the extremes like a snake biting its own tail?

In regard to the 1983 Missile Crisis, Anton ends up restating so many of the views expressed by the Left at the time: we were approaching Armageddon; we were unnecessarily aggressive; the Soviets acted defensively out of justified fear (of us); only luck prevented disaster; it was a military rather than a political crisis.

Today, of course, there is a real war, but layered upon it is the intensive political warfare intended to influence its course. Chief among Russia's objects in this regard is to disarm Ukraine by separating it from the West. And this it is attempting to do, as of old, with nuclear threats and protestations of victimhood. Nuclear threats must be taken seriously but also objectively, lest Russia be allowed to dictate Western policy by supercharging one of

the contending approaches in the debate over what to do.

In 1983 it did a masterful job of this, mobilizing immense segments of the European and American populations egged on by the leftist parties in Europe, the Democrats in the U.S., and highly skilled Soviet disinformation. This was not the imaginary Russian election influence of late but something of an entirely different character.

In 1992, August 5 to be exact, Bob Gates, then director of Central Intelligence, told me something that may not be generally known. When the CIA obtained the archives of the KGB's First Chief Directorate, Service A, "Active Measures"—or what we would call disinformation—these listed 600 American journalists and "opinion makers" in the department's pay. Cautioned by the possibility that the records themselves may have been disinformation, that—as intelligence agencies know how to do so well—many of the recipients may have been unaware of the source of their support, and that making their names public would have resulted in political strife and a hundred years of litigation, President Bush decided to let sleeping dogs lie. Subsequently, I confirmed this with the president, who cited exactly the same rationale.

One would imagine that not much American bread is being buttered by Vladimir Putin, but we do know that he has supported Marine Le Pen, and that Viktor Orbán, who benefits greatly from continued Russian energy supplies, has a coterie of American conservatives who admire, in my opinion justifiably, many of his stances but who are willing, in my opinion unjustifiably, to continue their association despite Hungary's drag on NATO's response to the invasion of Ukraine, and, at the time of writing, on the accession of Sweden and Finland to the alliance.

Now it is "conservatives" who are saying, as in "Nuclear Autumn," that "war fever" (what war fever?) promotes "the preposterous arguments...that the bomb isn't that bad" (no one reputable or influential says this), and that, "with casual insouciance...elites now speak of nuclear exchanges as an acceptable price to pay for stopping Russia." In fact, elites, plural, do not speak this way even if there may be unhinged individuals here and there who do. These accusations conform to the essay's overall gist that—as supposedly in 1983—the West is to blame, as evident in the characterization that

[t]here was a time when Russia wanted to be in it [the rules-based international order]; the West said no. Then Russia asked to be left alone. The West encir-



cled it, or made it feel encircled, which in present circumstances amounts to the same thing. Now Russia is being pushed.

So if Russia feels encircled, that means it is encircled, just as if someone feels that he is Napoleon he is Napoleon? It is true that the behavior of both will be conditioned by belief, but it would be a mistake to defer to such delusions in either case. And no, Russia is not being pushed: rather, it just invaded, yet again, a neighboring country. Neither the Baltic Republics, Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Romania, nor Bulgaria wished to be part of, or dominated by, the Soviet Union, and—even if NATO expansion precluded less threatening alternatives

(as I argue in “Ukraine: A Tragedy of Errors,” Spring 2022)—for them to have asserted and now to maintain their sovereign independence is neither encircling nor pushing Russia. That Ukraine—a large, Western-oriented country that in living memory suffered a Soviet genocide—has had no desire to be part of Russia and is not part of Russia has been proved in the last 30 years of its independence and is certainly being proved now.

With the fantastical, hallucinatory claim that Ukraine, run by Nazis, is a danger to Russia, Russia has invaded an independent state and unleashed upon Europe its greatest war since World War II. It is one thing to modulate our support of Ukraine in view of Russia’s destructive powers and to engage in reasonable, accurate debate in that regard. It

is another to allow our policy to be checked by inaccurate historical analogies and unrealistic fears. And it is disgraceful to edge toward sympathy for the obvious, undeniable aggressor.

Capitulation—and this is what is in the air—will give our enemies strength, make us weak, and, in the long run, subject the life force of civilization to the rigidities of totalitarian control. That is what ultimately is at stake. After half a century of holding steadfast in the world, what a pity that Republicans are in danger of embracing a posture they have so long abhorred.

*Mark Helprin is a senior fellow of the Claremont Institute and the author, most recently, of Paris in the Present Tense (Abrams Books).*

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## NUCLEAR WINTER’S TALE

by Michael Anton

**M**ARK HELPRIN ORGANIZES HIS RESPONSE to my essay into three objections. The first is that, *contra* my argument, it is worth risking nuclear confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. The second is that the Soviets had no reason to suspect American intentions in 1983 (or, by implication, at any other time). The unifying theme of the third is less clear, at least to me, though this section makes many points which are clear enough, but all of which were, or could have been, made under the rubric of the first.

Helprin’s first objection is undergirded by the assumption that the risk of nuclear confrontation with Russia is low. This assumption blends in with his second objection, since his point in arguing that Soviets had no reason to fear us in 1983, and so didn’t go nuclear then, is to assert that Russia has no reason to fear us today and so won’t do so now. Actually, to be more precise, Helprin makes a double assumption: that Russia knows it faces no existential threat from us, and so nukes are off the table, but also that Russia absolutely *should* fear us giving more aid to Ukraine, which would (and ought to) cause Russia to lose the war.

These two assumptions are, if not exactly contradictory, at least in tension. Russia should, at the same time, fear and not fear us; or Russia should fear us in a precisely certain way, to a precisely certain degree, that will constrain its behavior in precisely the manner that would give us the precise outcome Helprin wants.

But the main purpose of my piece was to show that matters of war and peace are hard to calibrate, especially in the nuclear age. Helprin at times reads like one of those quantitative political scientists supremely confident that everything can be counted, measured, and calculated to exactness. Nowhere is this more evident than in his middle section, in which he throws out a lot of supposedly impressive statistics to prove that I am “wrong on almost every major point.” But he never shows that, not on any point.

### Reading the Record

**T**O TAKE JUST ONE EXAMPLE, I CITE A SERIES of actions that the Reagan Administration took early in the president’s first term, intended to shake off the torpor of détente and malaise, and to signal to the So-

viets that the United States’s dismal decade was over. Helprin seems to dispute this, but a somewhat more careful reading of his litany of complaints reveals no actual counterpoints, allegations of specific errors, or alternative facts. He just raises a lot of questions and brings up a lot of detail about how military exercises are planned, apparently hoping the reader will come away impressed and distracted enough to think he has scored some kind of definitive refutation.

In fact, every action cited in my piece can be verified in contemporaneous reporting and other open-source documentation. I also relied on declassified records, the recollections of the participants (some from their own memoirs, some from interviews), popular and scholarly accounts of military exercises generally and the Reagan presidency specifically, Reagan biographies, plus the former president’s own autobiography, all of which state that the incoming administration had a deliberate plan, worked up during the transition, to increase the operations tempo of various “non-kinetic” maneuvers in order to put the Soviets on notice that a new sheriff was in town. I don’t claim to be any kind of expert on the period, only to have



read this stuff long ago out of personal interest and then to have reread it (plus some material I hadn't before seen, some of which had been declassified in the intervening years) for the writing of "Nuclear Autumn." I'm open to having my account disproved on any point. But then my sources would have to be wrong, too. Helprin artfully tries to convey the impression that he has disproved all of this when in fact he has disproved none of it.

He similarly denies the story of Stanislav Petrov without saying why or citing any sources. I wasn't there, so I can't be sure that what is alleged to have happened actually happened. Leaving aside this epistemological pickle (which could apply to almost any claim about anything, by anyone—including Helprin), there *are* records, written and verbal, that tell the story as I summarized it. Helprin cites no contrary evidence. He just says that the Petrov story sounds implausible to him, therefore it couldn't have happened, and so it didn't happen.

His real objection to my recounting the Petrov episode seems to be that, in his view, it makes the Soviets look too good. Far be it from me to whitewash that murderous regime. But even in the worst tyrannies, good men are still found and they sometimes do good things. Based on the available evidence, this appears to have been one such case.

Actually, Helprin quietly contradicts himself here as well. His explicit objection is that I made Petrov look too good, but he also implies that I made the Soviet leadership look worse than they actually were, because contrary to Petrov's fear (and later analysts' judgment), Helprin insists that Soviet leaders "would not" have launched a counterattack had they been informed of their detection system's false positive. He does not explain how he knows they "would not" have done so. Contrast his unsourced certainty with my sourced circumspection. As I wrote:

What would have happened had Petrov, per his orders, alerted his superiors? According to Bruce Blair, "[t]he top leadership, given only a couple of minutes to decide, told that an attack had been launched, would make a decision to retaliate." *There's no way to know for sure.* But he didn't, so they couldn't. [Emphasis added.]

Helprin requotes that quote from Blair, only to dismiss it out of hand, never condescending to acknowledge that I had already pointed out the unknowability of the counterfactual. In any case, if Helprin knows that the Soviets "would not" have retaliated, doesn't

that make the monsters in the Kremlin a little less monstrous than his whole piece assumes?

### Blizzard of Stats

**T**HE CENTERPIECE OF HELPRIN'S REPLY IS a long passage in which he tosses out an enormous amount of extraneous detail on specific Soviet weapons systems, at times getting so wonky as to sound like an arms control negotiator circa 1972 (an odd stance for a conservative hawk, to say the least). "Throw weights," anyone? When was the last time you heard *that* term? And what relevance could it possibly have to the topic at hand?

The answer is: none. Despite knowing a lot about nuclear matters, I concede that Helprin has demonstrated he can out-wonk me on throw weights, launcher-to-silo ratios in 1983, and much else. But all this is irrelevant to the main point, which is: what were the Soviets thinking at the time? All Helprin manages to show with his blizzard of stats is that, in his

In the broader sweep  
of American history,  
our country has been  
unwilling to expend its  
blood and treasure in  
peripheral regions or on  
others' quarrels.

estimation, the Kremlin *shouldn't* have feared us in 1983. He doesn't establish that they *didn't*.

Again, there are contemporaneous records and later accounts of this. Showing that they're wrong would require a demonstration with countervailing evidence, none of which Helprin provides. And, as I showed, even Ronald Reagan came to understand (or believe) that the Soviets' fear, however misplaced, was genuine. He too might have been wrong, but then his sources would also have to have been wrong, and that also would have to be demonstrated with—something.

Just as Helprin accuses me of being too soft on the Russians, he charges that I am too hard on the Reaganites. To do so, he carefully avoids this passage in my piece: "This is not so much to second-guess the Reagan Administration. It's hard to know what to do in complex matters of war and peace, and the Western alliance definitely needed a boost in the early '80s." My point was not that the administration acted recklessly, much less deliberately so. It's that even a group of men as serious and conscientious as Reagan and his lieutenants, acting in

a just cause from noble motives, risked much more than they intended to risk, and without realizing it. Helprin's counter to that, once you see through the squid ink of StratCom irrelevances, is that, again, since Soviets *should not* have felt threatened, they therefore *did not* feel threatened, and in saying otherwise I am repeating Soviet propaganda.

Helprin at several points drops names and makes reference to his military experience, I suppose to insinuate that my judgment on such matters is unreliable because I never served. (Though how can I be a chickenhawk when I'm the one advocating for less belligerence and more circumspection?) I suppose I could counter-name-drop my six years in the national security bureaucracy through two administrations and five years of teaching national security and strategy at the college and graduate levels. Instead, I will just point out that a former military man ought to be familiar with the old adage that "the enemy gets a vote." So even if it's true that the Soviets had no rational, justifiable reason to fear the Western alliance in 1983, it's still possible that they did, simply because they, and not us—and certainly not Mark Helprin, retroactively—got to decide what scared them and what didn't.

### Is It Reasonable?

**A** SIMILAR QUESTION SUFFUSES HELPRIN'S objection to my judgment about today. Sounding like a voice in the regime-uniparty-neoliberal-media-military-diplomatic-intelligence-think-tank chorus, he is quick to impugn the motives of anyone who dares suggest that Russia today might have reason to feel threatened. To make such a dastardly suggestion is to reveal oneself as a pro-Putin appeaser.

To get his point across, Helprin resorts to an extraordinary act of selective quotation that can only be called dishonest. It's true, I did write that

[t]here was a time when Russia wanted to be in it [the rules-based international order]; the West said no. Then Russia asked to be left alone. The West encircled it, or made it feel encircled, which in present circumstances amounts to the same thing. Now Russia is being pushed.

He cuts the final sentence off midway, without so much as the obligatory ellipses, prodding the reader to conclude that I said "Russia is being pushed"...to what? Obliterate Ukraine? In fact, what I said was that "Russia





is being pushed not so much to destroy [the rules-based international] order, which in any case it lacks the power to do, as to work with others to build a parallel one.” This is undeniably true. Does Helprin dispute it? And have we not guaranteed that outcome by, for example, cutting Russia off from international payment systems that we purport to operate neutrally? What should we expect the Russians to do? Conclude, “Well, it’s right and just that we can’t use SWIFT anymore; I guess that means no more international transactions for the motherland”? My larger point was that “it would be ironic if, in its overzealous defense of the ‘liberal international order,’ the West ended up driving together its adversaries, and even one erstwhile proto-ally (India), to create the first viable alternative to that order since 1945.” Anyway, if you need to stoop to this level of chicanery to score a point, you’re not arguing from a position of strength.

“So, if Russia feels encircled,” Helprin continues, “that means it is encircled, just as if someone feels that he is Napoleon he is Napoleon?” No—but see above. If Russia *feels* encircled, well, then Russia may act as if it is, in fact, encircled, regardless of what Helprin or anyone else thinks is Russia’s actual situation.

Helprin is convinced that the rectitude of the West’s motives in aiding Ukraine ought to preclude any undue blowback. This may

be true on some abstract moral level, but not in the real world. You might be within your First Amendment rights to shout slurs in an ethnic neighborhood, but you are still greatly increasing your chances of getting beaten up. That your assailants might be morally wrong to thrash you would not alleviate your injuries. The flipside of this conviction is the insistence that any suggestion that the West back off so as not to contribute to Russia’s feelings of encirclement (however paranoid) amounts to appeasement. Since Helprin knows the cause is just, Russia’s feelings don’t matter.

But they do matter, because those feelings might lead to something very bad. Should that happen, Helprin might take consolation that his side’s allegedly superior justice absolves them of all blame, but I wouldn’t. Since the consequences of that blowback would fall equally on all of us, my side no less than the enemy’s also gets (or should get) a vote.

The core of our disagreement is whether, in antagonizing Russia, the United States is taking any risks and whether, if so, Ukraine is worth those risks. One more point before leaving behind the first consideration. Helprin accuses me of making up some of the most outrageously reckless rhetoric of the pro-war ruling class, including the presently fashionable insouciant talk of nuclear exchanges. “No one reputable or influential says this,” he asserts. I suppose that depends on

the meanings of those two adjectives. In fact, as he not only declines to admit but insinuates the opposite, I did name and quote one such: Anne Applebaum, a Pulitzer Prize winner with prestigious perches at Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies and *The Atlantic*. I am much more likely than Helprin to question whether Applebaum any longer deserves her accolades, but there can be no question that, in the elite and mainstream consciousness, she remains both reputable and influential.

As to Ukraine’s relevance to the United States, I am persuaded by the late Angelo Codevilla (“What’s Russia to Us?,” Summer 2019) that Ukraine is—and more to the point, is perceived in the Kremlin to be—a vital interest of Russia, but is at best a peripheral interest of ours. One elementary mistake of statecraft is taking your adversary to the wall over something he considers a vital organ but that to you is a minor appendage, if that. That’s what it appears to me we are at risk of doing with Russia over Ukraine. Helprin is convinced there is no risk. He not only never explains how he knows that, he never even explains how he *could* know it. On what basis—what set of facts, figures, or special insight into the Russian mind—does his certainty rest?

Contrast that attitude with that of Herman Kahn, a scholar-thinker whom Hel-

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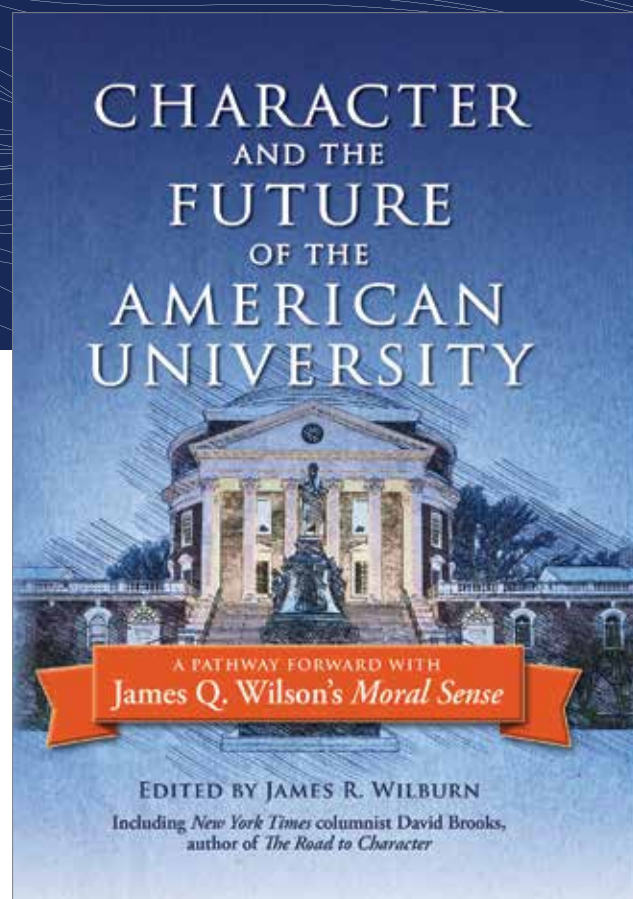
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prin falsely claims I impugn. It was not I but Stanley Kubrick (with an assist from Kahn himself, who talked to Kubrick at great length) who “mischaracterize[d]” Kahn as “Dr. Strangelove.” I referenced and quoted Kahn precisely to show that no one had thought about nuclear issues more deeply, or marshalled more facts and numbers to the effort—and yet Kahn himself still admitted, after all that work, the ultimate unknowability of how a nuclear conflict might go or where it might lead. Helprin, methinks, could learn something from Kahn about humility, circumspection, and the limits of human reason.

Codevilla concluded that an independent Ukraine—meaning one with all its pre-2014 territory, plus its Russian-majority regions totally disconnected from Moscow—is in any case “beyond our capacity to secure.” I agree and don’t see how that has changed because of the war. America’s ability to project power and impose its will is in decline. Is it really reasonable to believe that a country which could not, in 20 years, defeat a premodern, impoverished adversary can somehow easily have its way with the world’s largest nuclear power? In a country more than 5,000 miles from us, but that shares a 1,400-mile border with Russia?

Besides, America has pressing domestic problems which are more urgent *for us* than anything happening in Ukraine and that demand solutions before the United States can again be a coherent, powerful actor on the world stage. But still our elites—Helprin among them—cry for more Western action in Ukraine. Victor Davis Hanson has

observed that “societies in decline fixate on impossible postmodern dreams as a way of disguising their inability to address premodern problems.” I suspect the same is true in foreign affairs: countries that can’t keep trains on the tracks or raise enough chickens to meet demand for eggs instead go abroad in search of monsters to destroy.

### Goodbye to Adventurism

**S**PRINKLED THROUGHOUT HELPRIN’S reply are the usual and expected, if nevertheless still tiresome and empty, charges of “isolationism,” “capitulation,” and the like. Capitulation to what? Helprin never establishes what dog the United States has in this fight or how the American people might suffer if Russia wins the war—as, it seems to me, Russia, as the vastly greater power, could still do, absent some vastly greater Western provision of military aid to Ukraine, which might provoke Russia to do God-knows-what. Yes, yes, I agree that Putin is responsible for his own actions. But so are we responsible for ours, and if we do something that precipitates a wider war, that will be on us, even if Putin is a villain who never should have invaded in the first place.

Anyway, those words are just insults, with all the depth of that meme going around showing a children’s book entitled *Everyone I Don’t Like Is a Russian Bot*. These taunts convey little force anymore. I suppose they may work on people of a certain age, with a certain recollection of the Cold War and its alleged lessons. But anyone who knows anything about the broader sweep of American history

knows that our country was “isolationist”—i.e., eager to mind its own business and unwilling to expend its blood and treasure in peripheral regions or on others’ quarrels—far longer than it has been interventionist.

There was a time when the mere invocation of the *i*-word would cause interventionism’s critics to scurry defensively away, but those days are over. On the Right, the young in particular have no patience for this sort of thing anymore: neither the interventionism itself nor the cheap accusation of “isolationism.” If anything, the young Right is apt to embrace the label “isolationist” as a way of owning the insult.

The will to engage in this kind of adventurism today still exists only in the breasts of our ruling class, above all in its rapidly aging leadership. There are some on the young Left who go along out of obedience to their chiefs, but their interventionism lacks all conviction. And, as America’s competency declines—not just in military matters but in everything—the ruling class’s ability to successfully get its way will wane along with popular enthusiasm for foreign activism.

The sentiments Helprin expresses represent the last gasp of a way of thinking that served its purpose when the United States faced an external threat that was truly existential. It serves no purpose now, when Russia has difficulty crossing the Dnieper, much less the Vistula, and when the most pressing threats to America’s survival are domestic.

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