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CORRESPONDENCE

Russia and Ukraine

In writing my comment on Michael Anton's essay "Nuclear Autumn," in an attempt to confine the discussion to the very important subject at hand and avoid useless and infantile "ad hominism," if that is a phrase, I initially refrained from mentioning him by name ("Against the New Republican Isolationism," Winter 2022/23). Informed that he objected, I obliged with the attribution he requested. But as evidenced by his response to my refutation and to my fading generation, he's a big fan of ad hominism. In my 77th year, I'm not. But I don't blame him: when I was his age I was almost as foolish. Testosterone and all that. Finding and keeping a mate. Defending territory. It can make you seem quite idiotic.

In his refutation of my refutation ("Nuclear Winter's Tale," Winter 2022/23), there are so many careless misattributions of what I supposedly said, and misinterpretations of what I did say—there must be at least a dozen—that I would ask anyone who might be interested, all two of you, to go back and check the texts. You will find that I am quite well aware that Russia is afraid of us—though both unjustifiably and not as much as it would aver. Given the facts and history, in the manner of our snowflakes its exaggeration of the threats it perceives is self-indulgent license for atrocious behavior. On several levels it actually does know this, for the Russian soul is complex.

Contra Anton, I did not address various questions in terms of good and evil. You will find that the accusations he takes personally were not at all directed at him. You will find his presumed superiority to aged Cold Warriors like me. So as a test you might ask yourself: how were we doing in 1991, and how are we doing now?

You will find in regard to the story of the Russian who supposedly saved the world, that, rather than Anton in citing the presumed authority of Bruce Blair—who would dare contradict Bruce Blair?—I demonstrate by fact and reason why this Russian did not in fact save the world. To believe that he did is due to a simplistic, Hollywood understanding of the nuclear age.

You will find, *inter alia*, that I plainly did not endorse the reconquest of all Ukrainian territory or the risking of nuclear war, but quite the opposite, in a finely calibrated policy adjusted to the ever-changing, dangerous circumstances—which is why I take heat no less from the cowboys than from the Indians.

And you will find so much else dubiously proffered—Anton continues to claim that American carrier aircraft overflew Russian bases (the hell they did)—that I throw my trust upon the reader to decide for himself by comparing the two articles, rather than here to continue the accounting of errors. For, among other things, my palsied, arthritic fingers protest to me through my ear trumpet that they don't want to write anything longer than a letter.

Nonetheless, I'm compelled to address the accusations that I'm "dishonest" and indulge in "chicanery." (Are we in the antebellum South? "Why, you sir! Are guilty of...chicanery!") These accusations are based on the belief that I deviously omitted an ellipsis. Well, I understand the trauma and feeling of unsafeness that for those of certain exquisite sensitivities the absence of an ellipsis may engender, but why was this particular ellipsis not there?

First, I addressed only the portion of the unellipsisized quote and only to counter its sympathetic accounting of Russia's defensiveness. What followed in the original was irrelevant to the point I was implying (which was that Putin's lawyer couldn't have done

better) but was, rather, a description of Russia's actions as a result of its defensiveness—specifically its desire to forge a parallel world order: not my subject.

Second, the accusation—leaving things out so as to skate by—can be turned around. To wit, the omitted passage in question, describing Russia's pushback as an effort to build a parallel world order, omits that Russia's pushback also includes invading Georgia and Ukraine; threatening Sweden, Finland, and the Baltic Republics; waging cyberwar against the West; and, most pertinently, making nuclear threats as promiscuously as Donald Trump uses exclamation points. That's quite a lot to leave out. And yet I would accuse Anton not of dishonesty but only of the inability to account for crucial elements of reality.

And, third, although it's really a stretch to call someone dishonest due to the omission of an ellipsis, this might still hang by a hair from a technical violation were an ellipsis to have been required, which it was not. At least not according to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th Edition, Section 10.61, "Where Ellipses Points Are Not Used," part 4: "After a block quotation ending with a grammatically complete sentence."

All this—which, after the British, Justice Scalia called "argle bargle"—though intensely irritating is yet not important. What is important is that if Russia prevails in Ukraine Europe is at risk of being neutralized—either by accommodating a revanchist Russia or by the necessity of focusing strictly upon its own defense. The recent history of the West suggests accommodation.

Without Europe, the second great locus of power, we, the United States—unprotected by the oceans and facing a Russo-Chinese axis as the rest of humanity is cowed—will not fare well. This may be the understatement of the century.

Unfortunately, libertarians and what Anton terms proud isolationists do not understand such operations and consequences. That they do not is a potentially fatal mistake arisen from either a profound ignorance or a profound misinterpretation of the workings of the international system both historically and in the present.

Mark Helprin
Charlottesville, VA

Michael Anton replies:

Leaving aside the fresh spate of nasty insults ("useless," "infantile," "idiotic") that one hopes not to have to endure from someone nominally within one's own organization, I am reminded of the *Peanuts* cartoon in which Charlie Brown laments a bad grade by stating his preference for subjects in which the answers are "mostly a matter of opinion."

Mark Helprin would have been better off sticking to the main point on which we disagree: is it in American interests to remain involved in the Ukraine war? That at least is a matter of opinion.

Instead, he again tries to litigate various facts, accusing me of grave but unspecified errors. And, once again, he doesn't bother to refute any of my alleged errors. Is it that he can't, or that he thinks it's too much trouble, or that it's not worth the trouble? But then why does he keep coming back to this point if he's not going to make the effort to substantiate anything?

Let's assume he could irrefutably show that I was wrong on some detail—about, say, the American surveillance flights that preceded KAL 007 and helped set Soviet air defenses on edge on August 31-September 1, 1983. Would that fact alone suddenly obviate all the rest of the analysis? Would it suddenly make shoveling weapons and money at Ukraine prudent or wise?



Helprin doesn't explicitly say so, but the whole point of this letter, and of his prior reply to my earlier piece, is to insinuate so. It's one of the oldest tricks in the book: find and isolate one trivial error, pound away at it, and insist that it alone destroys the entirety of the argument. For a recent example, see Mehdi Hasan versus Matt Taibbi. In Taibbi's voluminous reporting on Twitter's censorship and collusion with the federal government, he got one date and one acronym wrong, ergo (say his enemies) all the rest of his work is garbage that can't be trusted. The tactic is cheap, dishonest, and transparent to anyone who can read.

Except, in my case, Helprin still hasn't specified or proved any errors. He just billows yet more smoke to avoid the central issue: should the United States be involved in the Ukraine war? We know that his answer is "yes." So why doesn't he just argue that case honestly?

I suspect he's less confident he can persuade others than he lets on. If he can change the subject to "facts" rather than prudence, he has a fighting chance of buffaloning casual readers into believing that my antiwar analysis founders on "facts" and so the only alternative is to support the war.

But let me end with the same fact on which I ended last time: rightly or wrongly (rightly in my view), the times have left the hawks behind. The American Right's appetite for overseas interventionism is at its lowest in nearly a century, and this becomes truer the younger the cohort one examines. Mitch McConnell's declaration that support for Ukraine is "the number one priority for the United States right now, according to most Republicans" is true of the leadership who control the party, but is hopelessly out of touch with its voters. America's pointless exercise in prolonging a destructive conflict not in our interest will prove to be the last hurrah of a way of thinking that should have been retired at the end of the Cold War. Like our geriatric political class, it has stuck around far too long for any good it might be doing. But also like that

class, it's finally on its way out. To both I say, depart, and let us have done with you.

Kennan the Prophet

Reading Michael Anton's "The Containment of George Kennan" (Winter 2022/23), I was reminded of a time in 1985, while serving as press attaché in U.S. Embassy Oslo, when I received an invitation to attend a luncheon at which Kennan was the guest of honor. If memory serves, this was the first time he had ever accepted an embassy invitation. I had read most of his work on U.S. foreign policy and knew of his near-iconic standing amongst many members of the U.S. Foreign Service. I was asked to take the lead in keeping up the conversation.

Foreign policy issues dominated the discussion, including NATO's deterrence capability and the dangers posed by undetectable Soviet submarines in the Kola Peninsula. The guests included representatives of the Norwegian government, who were pleased—at least they appeared to be—with Kennan's talk. That night, the ambassador called and asked if I would be interested in a one-on-one conversation with Kennan over breakfast the next morning, as the ambassador himself had an appointment that could not be broken. I eagerly accepted.

Unlike the previous day, foreign policy issues occupied only a brief part of our lengthy conversation. What remains most vividly was Kennan's pessimism about the future of the United States. Time and time again he returned to the same theme: immigration from non-European nations would be a disaster and the thin line that separated the U.S. from the rest of the world would disappear. Kennan emphasized that mindset by repeatedly pointing out our cultural heritage as the *sine qua non* of our exceptionalism. Toward the end of the session, he repeated that the flood of unassimilable strangers, not the Soviet threat, would shake the nation to its very core. Kennan believed the country in which he

had been raised and which he had served was slowly but surely disappearing. Given the current state of the nation, his words can only be described as prophetic.

Vincent Chiarello
Reston, VA

Prison Break

Some readers of Joseph M. Bessette's review of my book *What's Prison For?: Punishment and Rehabilitation in the Age of Mass Incarceration* ("Let the Punishment Fit the Crime," Winter 2022/23), may come away thinking that I am a prison abolitionist, that I don't believe in punishment, that I think incapacitating criminals doesn't affect crime rates, and generally that I advocate turning the U.S. into Norway. None of those things is true. If you are confused, I encourage you to pick up the book, which Bessette judged to be "slim" and "readable."

Bill Keller
The Marshall Project
New York, NY

Joseph M. Bessette replies:

Obviously, Mr. Keller and I disagree about the best way forward in criminal justice in the United States. Like him, I encourage you to read his book, which is not only "slim" and "readable" but also quite interesting and particularly informative about new efforts to rehabilitate criminals. Read the book and then re-read my review, and you can judge whether my review was in any way unfair or inaccurate.

Winter of Our Discontent

I always enjoy reading Mark Helprin, and his lament about the mangling of the English language ("My Native English Must I Now Forgo?," Winter 2022/23) is no exception. But I was glad to see him

concede near the end of his essay: "Everyone makes mistakes. Undoubtedly there are some above." I am taking this as an invitation to offer friendly correction.

Three paragraphs earlier he writes: "Richard III said, 'Now is the winter of our discontent.'" Shakespeare's full sentence—or at least the first full thought, ending with a semicolon—is: "Now is the winter of our discontent made glorious summer by this sun of York." Richard's meaning is that the winter of warfare is over and the English (excepting himself) are returning to the joys of a peaceful life. Leaving out half the verb, and all the object of the sentence, creates the opposite impression. The shorter quote is grammatically and syntactically sound but is misused by many literate people.

Richard Doerflinger
La Conner, WA

Mark Helprin replies:

I'm happy that Mr. Doerflinger appreciated the Shakespeare reference, one of three in the piece, the other two probably not noted by many. I did, however, understand the sense of Richard's speech, but wanted to use that most famous opening phrase even if out of context. And there's a story behind that as well. My father was the president of London Films, which in the 1950s produced Laurence Olivier's *Richard III*. It was a big deal at the time, fetching the highest price ever paid in history for the single showing of a film—nationwide, as an NBC special. Times were a lot different then.

Olivier's performance was spectacular. Given that we knew him, I decided that even though I was just a kid I would learn the first speech and impress him with my skills as a thespian. If only I had a film of my screaming, mugging, squealing, and jerking about! There is nothing quite as entertaining as truly atrocious acting. I didn't get to perform for Olivier, but I'm sure that had I the chance he never would have forgotten it.

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