

An Opportunity and a Challenge



by Conrad Black

All of modern history could be ransacked in vain to find a more ludicrously implausible and self-defeating policy than the Biden administration's deliberate suppression of American oil and gas production, which has scorched the world oil price upwards and financed the barbarous Russian invasion of Ukraine that the United States rightly condemns and vigorously opposes.

The 2002 invasion of Iraq was justifiable as an assault on a terrorism-exporting state, though allegations of development of weapons of mass destruction proved to be false. But the chief geopolitical consequence of it was the disintegration of the Iraqi state and the assumption of a vastly increased influence over Iraq by America's principal regional enemy, Iran. As is now almost universally recognized, the enterprise was a disaster, but if instead of dismissing the Iraqi armed forces and police while leaving them to retain their own weapons and munitions, assuring a prolonged civil war, the

United States and its allies had replaced Saddam Hussein with another autocrat whom they could be confident would not provoke the West, that intervention could have been a durable success.

The very long intervention in Afghanistan began with the perfect justification of overthrowing the terrorism-supporting regime of the Mullah Omar and driving al-Qaeda out of the country. Of course, it became the supreme example of mistaken mission creep and took on the impossible task of transforming that primitive multi-tribal state into a modern democracy. For most of the 20 year-American involvement there, the United States was generously assisting Pakistan, which redirected a significant portion of that assistance to the Haqqani Taliban, which conducted guerrilla warfare against the United States and its allies in Afghanistan throughout their long presence there.

Iraq and Afghanistan may furnish some precedent for the recent policy toward Ukraine, but in profound policy incoherence and irresolution, truckling to climate change extremism with the inevitable consequence of enabling a very dangerous belligerency is a uniquely terrible and lethal strategic misjudgment. If freedom is stamped out in Ukraine and that country is, however contestedly, subsumed back into Russia, it will be a terrible set-back for the West and the partial disgorgement of much of our great and bloodless strategic victory in the Cold War.

In his State of the Union message on March 1, President Joe Biden had the supreme opportunity to turn his troubled administration and steep slide in approval ratings around (and they do seem to have turned up a little, but not because of that address—because of the comparative success of the Ukrainians). If he had boldly declared that the dangers of climate change and the efficacy of a reduction of fossil fuel consumption, questions that are, to say the least, strenuously debated, had to yield to an immediate strategic threat of

greater urgency, and announced steps that would sharply reduce the price of oil and natural gas, it would have ranked with a long series of previous distinguished examples of courageous presidential leadership.

It would have been a sequel to President Franklin Roosevelt's pursuit of the status of the "great arsenal of democracy" (1940), President Harry Truman's call for assistance for Greece and Turkey against local communists and the USSR, and the Berlin Airlift and the United Nations intervention in Korea. It would have justified some comparison with President John F. Kennedy's address on the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, President Lyndon Johnson's championship of civil rights in 1965, and, however controversial the underlying commitment, President Richard Nixon's invocation of the "silent majority" of Americans over Vietnam in 1969.

There's no doubt that the stakes in the Ukraine war justified considerably more drastic measures than were taken, and that this swiftly escalated act of monstrous aggression has become a challenge to the moral integrity and strategic security of Western civilization. American and Western opinion clearly recognize this and are ready for measures adequately forceful to assure an acceptable result.

The American paleolithic conservative right, though it's understandably skeptical of the current leadership of the Pentagon and rightly mindful of misconceived recent American military expeditions, is falsely trying to frighten America with the specter of another Vietnam: an open-ended commitment to ground combat with no exit strategy and grossly insufficient justification. Some of them are allowing impatience and skepticism to warn of non-existent dangers, as no one is asking for U.S. ground combat forces in Ukraine. A triumph for the suddenly semi-formalized tandem of China and Russia will completely humiliate the West and will green-light the continued expansion of both Russia and China in supremely confident disregard for the West, despite suddenly resurrected

Western moral solidarity.

In this sense, we are somewhat reenacting the late 1930s, of which Winston Churchill said, "There never was a war more easy to stop than [World War II]," if the British and French had not caved repeatedly, whetting the appetite and overconfidence of Hitler, the Japanese imperialists, and Mussolini. All the West needs to do now to reinforce successfully the inspiring heroism of the Ukrainians and their remarkable leader President Volodymyr Zelensky is to add slightly increased pressure on the scales of the correlation of forces in Ukraine. That Russian President Vladimir Putin is threatening a potential nuclear response, a broadened conflict, and the public execution of Ukrainian resisters to the invasion of their country is an indication of how severely challenged his criminal invasion is.

The selection of the next step by the West must be made in the next week or 10 days and will require extraordinary acuity and determination. We appear to be very close to agreement that about 70 adequately modern MiG warplanes of Poland, Romania, and Hungary, for which the Ukrainians have many trained aviators, will be handed over to Ukraine and replaced by the temporary deployment of more modern and numerous American and NATO squadrons. It may be that matters are being set up to allow Vice President Kamala Harris to do a star turn in announcing this in Central Europe this coming week. Even this small step would be unexceptionable in international law, and would ratchet up the pressure on Putin to negotiate an end to his Ukrainian invasion to very difficult levels.

There's no doubt of the overwhelming preeminence of the West over Russia or of its moral right and duty to act. What we now face, thanks to the redoubtable Ukrainians, is as much an opportunity as a challenge to Western statesmen. There have been many green shoots of the revival of Western moral political fiber in the last two weeks, and a positive outcome of this, the greatest international crisis in 60 years, is

distinctly possible and absolutely necessary. The fact that this is the only visible path back to public favor for the president and his administration presumably has not gone unnoticed by them.

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