

# Turkey's Relationship with the West

by Conrad Black

I will maintain, until next week when the Republican convention will be over, my self-imposed gag on substantive comments about the presidential race. But I would like to make an interim comment on the media. Peggy Noonan is correct, as usual, that the public is so contemptuous of the incandescent liberal and Democratic biases of the national media that there will be a pro-Trump backlash. Last week, I defended the comparative political center from attack from the left and the right.

On Thursday, Fareed Zakaria had me on a panel for his CNN program, *GPS*, where my opponents were prominent liberal historians who accused the Republicans of cranking up a racist campaign, debated the distinction I made between racial bigotry and objection to the illegal infiltration of this country by 12 million people, and attacked the Republicans for not deserting their candidate in advance and ensuring a Democratic landslide, as they did with Goldwater in 1964. On Friday, at the Freedom Fest in Las Vegas (via Skype), I defended Franklin D. Roosevelt from the charge of being "an opponent of liberty." Both occasions were very civilized and courteous on all sides, but it gives me pause to see what extremes even reasonable people are driven to in what used to be generally rational political discourse.

CNN's attempts to claim that Trump had buyer's remorse about Mike Pence as his vice-presidential nominee and that Melania Trump might have deliberately plagiarized some of her remarks to the convention are twitching reflexes of its liberal biases, which some of its personnel are making a professional effort to overcome. The patient, sensible, silent majority of

Americans has the myth-making national media, as well as the those who have mismanaged both parties for the last two decades, in its sights.

The week's American political news is unlikely to be of as much lasting importance as the attempted coup in Turkey. That pivotal country that connects Europe and Asia, and has about 75 million people, can have wide influence on the Middle East and Europe. Turkey was one of the original great nation-states in the 16th century, with France, England, Spain, and the Holy Roman Empire in Vienna. At its greatest extent, it occupied almost all of North Africa and Arabia and what are now Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan, the Caucasus, and most of the Black Sea coast, and it twice reached the gates of Vienna, in 1529 and 1683. Its attempt to take maritime control of the Mediterranean was defeated at the famous Battle of Lepanto in 1571. The Turks are not fondly remembered in any of their former satrapies.

Turkey, under the Ottomans, a sultanate that declined fairly steadily through the 18th and 19th centuries, was reviled as the "sick man of Europe" and its succession of leaders as "the Abominable Porte." Yet it gave a very respectable account of itself in World War I; outlasted the Russians in the war, though it was not successful against the Russian army; and sent the British, French, and Australians packing at Gallipoli, inflicting 250,000 casualties and almost destroying Winston Churchill's career. One of the leaders of the resistance at Gallipoli, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founded the republic in 1923, having expelled the invading Greeks, Turkey's most ancient foe, from Asian Turkey. The Turks have not been in a war since, and rebuffed Churchill's efforts to attract them into the Second World War against Germany in 1944. Turkey declared war on Germany only in March 1945, to, as Ataturk's successor, Ismet Inonu, put it, "be at the table and not on the menu."

The attempted coup last weekend does appear to mark the end

and interment of the Kemalist era in Turkey, almost a century after Kemal Ataturk overthrew the Ottomans, secularized government, and gave Turkey a Western alphabet and Western attire. He ruled for 15 years and died in office, and remains a national hero. He left a constitution that conferred on the army the duty to uphold democracy. As generally happens in such states (such as Algeria), this can involve the intervention of the armed forces to defend democracy by evicting from office a democratically elected government that opposes democracy. This was the sad but predictable fate of President George W. Bush's championship of democracy in Lebanon and Gaza: the victory of Hezbollah and Hamas.

The Turkish armed forces have intervened four times successfully to overthrow governments. They have relinquished office voluntarily to democratically chosen successors, and have not imagined that their natural vocation was government. The incumbent president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was removed as mayor of Istanbul, a position to which he was elected on the strength of his popularity as a soccer player, for promoting religious intolerance. When he was elected prime minister with a heavy majority in 2002 (a year was required to have an official ban lifted, even after he was released from prison and had rebranded his political party), he set about shuffling the senior military officers. He stopped the practice of Turkish governments, civilian and military, of shutting down mosques for repairs when their mullahs became provocative and seemed to enflame their congregations.

Erdogan has long been a traditionalist in wishing to emphasize the Muslim nature of the Turkish government and society, while retaining direction of the state in non-clerical hands. He has quarreled with his former close religious ally, Fethullah Gulen, a former imam and leader of a liberal Muslim movement. Gulen, like many others, reproaches Erdogan for conducting an incremental subversion of the constitution and usurping dictatorial powers for himself. Erdogan has blamed last

weekend's coup attempt on Gulen, who denies it from his self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania.

Erdogan began well, cleaned up a lot of corruption that had accumulated under the old regime, and generated swift economic growth, almost tripling Turkey's per capita GDP in twelve years. He was elected not only because of ambitions for reform and more assertive Muslim sentiments, but also to Europe's cool reception to Turkey's repeated efforts to draw closer to the European Union. As he tried for enhanced political and diplomatic stature, Erdogan became outspokenly hostile to Israel and pandered to the historically hostile Arab powers. This overture, after a few years of apparent success, has collapsed in shambles. The Turkish government's detestation of the Assad regime in Damascus, propped up by the Iranians and Russians, is so extreme that Erdogan for a time assisted ISIS in its efforts to remove that regime. ISIS attacks in Turkey have disabused Erdogan of the advisability of that gambit. Erdogan is now back to an uneasy cordiality with Israel.

Erdogan's extravagance (such as in building a \$500 million palace against court orders in an environmentally protected area, and leveling parts of Istanbul without consultation) has antagonized at least half the people, and he has met substantial electoral resistance in moving from prime minister to president and trying to rewrite his constitution to consolidate the powers of both offices. His attempt to resolve what amounted to a civil war with Turkey's 30 million Kurds has broken down and there is a good deal of sectarian and terrorist violence. The latest events clearly portend an exploitation of the attempted coup to try to tighten his autocratic domination of the state. Obviously, Erdogan was already planning a further crackdown on his enemies, as he arrested 6,000 people in two days, including previously compiled lists of 2,000 judges and prosecutors.

Unlike the previous military coups in Turkey, last weekend's was not supported by the leaders of the armed forces. Erdogan

evaded the putschists, who did not get control of the media, and as usually is the case, except in totalitarian states, the military declined to fire on civilians. Erdogan got his message out by a cell-phone-filmed interview with CNN in Turkey and across the social media. Though aircraft attacked the gaudy presidential palace and the parliament, and hostile aircraft even approached his airplane as he returned from his vacation residence to the capital, Ankara, it was clear by Saturday morning that most of the armed forces and most of the public were opposed to the coup. The Muslim clergy sprang into action and the loudspeakers of the nation's mosques summoned the faithful to the president's support with a prayer for endangered Islam in the middle of the night. The commander of the army was briefly seized by his own assistants, but even opposition political parties, which are very vocal and representative, preferred to oppose Erdogan by constitutional means.

It is amazing that Erdogan, with his Ottoman nostalgia, doesn't just occupy Syria and Sunni Iraq; the world, including most of the inhabitants of Syria and Sunni Iraq, would welcome it. Instead of cynically playing his domestic Kurds and those ostensibly in Iraq off against each other, Erdogan should consistently befriend Kurdistan and use it as an escape valve for Turkey's Kurdish dissidents. Despite his untrustworthiness and inconsistencies, it should be possible for the West to deal with Erdogan now that he has quarreled with everyone else. It should be possible to bring Turkey into a spheres-of-interest agreement with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, cordoning off most of the Middle East from the baleful influence of Iran. Like much else, this will have to await the new president in Washington, but either candidate could use the isolation and rattled stability of Erdogan as a basis to rebuild a constructive relationship that would have to be based entirely on aligned mutual interest.

First published in