

*Boris Yeltsin as Abraham Lincoln? (1995)*

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Andrei Kozyrev, Russia's foreign minister, has been defending the bombing of Chechen civilians to suppress the independence that the Chechens declared in 1991. He compares Yeltsin's war to Lincoln's Civil War against the secessionist South. And Michael McCurry, then about to debut as the new White House spokesman, offered some smooth support for Yeltsin's and Kozyrev's "new democracy . . . in the former Soviet Union," saying "in *our* long history as a democracy . . . we dealt with a secessionist movement in an armed conflict called the Civil War." He added later that while "we don't like innocent civilians losing their lives . . . Chechnya is by international recognition part of Russia."

So was Yeltsin's Russia by international recognition part of Gorbachev's Soviet Union in 1991, when Soviet soldiers killed innocent civilians in Vilnius seeking independence for Lithuania, shot at citizens in Baku to head off independence for Azerbaijan, and fired into a peaceful demonstration in Tbilisi to stop Georgian independence. Yeltsin in 1991 was president of the Russian republic and was *for Russia seceding*. He denounced the use of the Soviet army against Soviet citizens in the Baltics as a violation of the Soviet constitution—just as now civilian leaders of the movement toward democracy in Russia and some of Russia's highest-ranking generals are denouncing the repeated bombing of innocent Chechens as unconstitutional, barbarous and a political disaster.

In a January 1990 editorial, George Will observed that "[t]he contrast between Lithuania's arguments now and South Carolina's then [in 1860] is striking, beginning with the fact that Carolinians wanted secession to preserve slavery, whereas Lithuanians want secession to escape it." He wrote "The best the Soviet Union can hope for is the choice between imploding and exploding." If Gorbachev didn't choose, Will suggested, the Soviet Union "would suffer both fates—implosion and explosion—

simultaneously." The same might be said for Russia and Yeltsin today. Unfortunately, Western policies, by encouraging both internal repression and external expansion, make both fates more likely.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher's immediate reaction to the bombing and shelling of Chechen civilians was to express "sympathy" for Yeltsin – the bombardier. He had only "done what he had to do to prevent [Chechnya] from breaking away." He was as "restrained as [he] could be." *In 1995, as in 1991, West European and U.S. leaders are blindly resolved to preserve the integrity of states whose subjects have to be bombed into subjection.* Western leaders expressing pious concerns about the killing of Chechen innocents resisting Russian domination cannot escape all responsibility for it if they insist on Russia's unconditional right to keep the Chechens in subjection.

So, while Bill Clinton and Warren Christopher are saying it's an "internal affair" for Russia, Russian democrats and some top Russian generals are saying that, in the days of instant global television, no slaughter of innocent civilians is an internal affair.

The situation in Chechnya, a place that Boris Yeltsin vows to cleanse of "gangsters" – using the word broadly enough to apply to any Chechen who resists – is an affair that is neither local nor confined to Russia. Its ramifications extend far beyond Chechnya, to other Russian republics and to now-independent former Soviet republics (FSRs) where Yeltsin and Kozyrev have been using the latest incarnation of the KGB, as well as Russian troops acting as "peacekeepers," to stir up ethnic conflicts that drive civilians on all sides from their homes and leave Russian troops in place, frequently on former Soviet military bases. Yeltsin's assaults on Chechnya and the FSRs, moreover, are closely related to Milosevic's cleansing of non-Serbs from former Yugoslav republics and from Kosovo, an internal part of Serbia seized in 1913, to which two U.S. administrations have inconsistently issued a guarantee against Serbian attack.

Milosevic was the only European head of state who sent a letter of congratulations to the plotters of the August 1991 coup in the Soviet Union. Yeltsin, who was at the top of the plotters' hit list, denounced Milosevic's barbarism; in April 1992 Yeltsin joined the U.S. in voting for UN sanctions against Serbia for its seizure of land and "forcible expulsions" designed to "change the ethnic composition of the population" of Bosnia and its "continued expulsion of non-Serb civilians" from Croatia. There

was no doubt about the source of the genocidal aggression. But the steady retreat of Western mediators from even a show of enforcing the sanctions against Serbia that prohibit Serbia's continued reinforcement and resupply of its proxies in Bosnia and Croatia, taught Yeltsin and Kozyrev they could answer Russian critics of their Western bias against asserting Russian interests in East Europe and the FSRs by adopting the critics' own program of Great Russian expansion — and still could be "Western." Until late in the assault on Chechnya, U.S. and other Western leaders have largely ignored fears of Russia expressed by the newly independent states and some Russian republics. And Western "mediation" has helped Milosevic create a Greater Serbia.

Russia soon became the most overt supplier of the tools of war that Serbia was sending to its proxies in Bosnia and Croatia. By the summer of 1994 Yeltsin and Kozyrev had announced that Russia had no international borders other than those of the former Soviet Union; and they have made clear that Russia's sphere of interest extends to its "near abroad" and beyond that—even to Bosnia and Croatia, which have never been in Moscow's sphere of interest. Milosevic's Greater Serbia had become the model for the Greater Russia of Yeltsin and Kozyrev.

In fact, the assault on Chechnya resembles in detail Milosevic's 1991 assault on Croatia: for example, his use of fifth columns and paramilitary and military forces from Serbia (initially in disguise and then used openly to "separate" the combatants); the bombing into rubble of hospitals and other buildings in Croatian towns like Vukovar; brazenly silly claims that it was the victims who were bombing and shelling their own women and children and their own slender means of defense; the offer of cease-fires as a means of disarming the victims; and, above all, the use of terror to drive out the population of strategic towns. All to be repeated in Bosnia.

For some time now, Russia, as a member of the Contact Group, has surpassed the Europeans in openly supporting a confederation of Serbia with its proxies. The confederation would make sure that a heavily-armed Serbia will continue after the Contact Group "peace" to send soldiers and war materials to complete the creation of a contiguous Greater Serbia at the expense of Bosnia and Croatia, which the Contact Group persists in trying to deprive of arms.

Western governments supported Gorbachev against Yeltsin in the years leading up to the August coup, just as they now back

Yeltsin against any alternative. But they are mistaken now, just as they were then, to support an individual rather than a path of evolution towards democracy, free markets and conformity to international norms banning the seizure of territory by force and genocidal attacks on civilians. Western policy makes it more likely that Russia will keep moving in the wrong direction.

The expansion of Russian control and influence in its near and not-so-near abroad has dire implications for the future of democracy and free markets in Russia, as well as in the FSRs, and for the future of Russia as a trustworthy "partner" for peace and for arms control agreements. In fact, the "new democracy . . . in the former Soviet Union" referred to by McCurry — unlike that of Lincoln — has yet to come into being. Russia has a long way to travel to reach a democratic government with the checks and balances of a parliament, presidency and judiciary under the rule of law. Yeltsin has himself said that "Russia comprehends democracy poorly.... In our history, it has been all or nothing. Either revolutionary anarchy or a ruthless regime."

It's most unlikely that Yeltsin's repeated bombardments interlaced with pledges to stop bombing civilians in Grozny and surrounding villages indicate that he is not in charge — that General Pavel Grachev, the defense minister, has repeatedly surprised Yeltsin by disobeying the orders to stop. Yeltsin can hardly have been repeatedly surprised in Chechnya, as some pundits suggest; the attacks appeared in Russian media as well as on CNN International. In Yeltsin's October 1993 confrontation with the parliament, it was Yeltsin who ordered Grachev to bring tanks into Moscow to use against parliament. And it was a reluctant Grachev whom Yeltsin describes as hostage to the "deeply democratic slogan" that "the army is outside politics."<sup>1</sup>

Yeltsin made his narrow escape in that confrontation with the Supreme Soviet by, he says, "formally . . . violating the constitution, going the route of anti-democratic measures and dispersing the parliament, all for the sake of establishing democracy and the rule of law in the country, while the parliament was defending the constitution in order to overthrow the lawfully elected president." Yeltsin applies his doubts about parliaments much more widely than to the Supreme Soviet, the congress conceived by Gorbachev. He doesn't think much of the "bandits, fascists and criminals" who make up the Supreme Soviet. He says, with heavy sarcasm, that, bad as it is, it is no "freak in the wonderful family of parliaments of the world." His doubts extend to the U.S. Congress:

The word *congressman*, *deputy*, or *senator* in various languages is not surrounded by such a glowing halo. We have only to recall Mark Twain to realize that this elected body has long been associated in the minds of Western people with corruption, official sloth, and an inflated and empty self-importance . . . constantly beset with scandals and exposés.

But Yelstin is no humorist.

His low opinion of the present Russian parliament — on which the West relies for ratifying extensions of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) Treaty, etc. — exceed his contempt for the parliament that ratified the original treaties. *Yeltsin says that the latter — Congress's dedicated arms controllers will be interested to learn — was only "feigning advocacy for disarmament [and] peace throughout the world. The present one is "not even pretending to pass itself off as peaceloving, as its predecessor in the era of Communist stagnation had done."* None of this qualifies Russia as a believable NATO "partner for peace." Nor as a trustworthy signatory of new treaties on strategic arms and strategic defense. Nor as a credibly impartial member of a group working out a "just and lasting peace" in the Balkans.

In the Balkans, the American, British, French, German and Russian leaders of the five-nation Contact Group have been trying to compel the acceptance of their continually changing "take it or leave it" "peace" plan. Jimmy Carter, after three and a half years of Serbian ethnic cleansing, has made a breakthrough, we are told, and the State Department has joined him in pressing Bosnians and Croats to accept. Meanwhile, the Krajina Serbs in Croatia continue to punctuate Carter's "cease-fire" with cross-border attacks violating Bosnian and Croatian sovereignty, and have just stated that their next step will be to unite with the Serbs in Bosnia and, as a step after that, with Serbia itself.

That just happens to be the Contact Group's deliberately obscure "peace plan." It would create a contiguous Greater Serbia. And that, as any fine-grained analysis of the thoroughly mixed demography shows, means "cleansing" the area of non-Serbs, severing Croatia, and breaking Bosnia into a half dozen islands under Serbian siege with no defensible connection with each other or with the outside world of trade and investment they need to survive. It would mean increased forced migrations

and civil disorder in a Europe whose imperial past has left its populations irrevocably impure. The overreaching of Eurocrats, who confidently expected to “solve” the Balkan problem quickly, has already revived old antagonisms among the members of the new “united” Europe and has bitterly divided the Atlantic Alliance.

Ideas for a NATO expanded to the east by the inclusion of Russia as a “Partner for Peace” as well as the East European and former Soviet republics appear mutually incompatible rather than merely Utopian. It is a resurgent, expansive Russia from whom these FSRs and former members of the Warsaw Pact need protection.

The last five years of European and American policy for southeast and east central Europe and for the Former Soviet Republics have resulted in both implosion and explosion – neither peace nor containment. *It is time for a basic reassessment of policy for the world emerging from the fall of the Communist dictatorships.*

The new Congress is taking as part of its first order of business hearings for a “Peace Powers Act of 1995” to replace the War Powers Resolution. It will cast a critical eye on the wild growth of “peacekeeping” where there is no peace to keep. What most urgently needs consideration, based on Balkan recent history, is the assurance that no American forces will be used in peacekeeping operations inconsistent with the UN Charter and the Convention Against Genocide: that they will not be used to consolidate a country’s hold on territory seized by violence; that they will not facilitate the cleansing from that territory of any ethnic group; and that American forces will be able to achieve a clearly defined political objective and to defend themselves without fear of veto by any country supporting the aggressor. Congress should also consider imposing constraints on the billions of dollars now used, directly or by way of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, to support “peacekeeping” operations by other countries which do not meet the above criteria.

In hearings on a “Bosnia and Herzegovina Self-Defense Act,” Congress will review the increasingly zany political arguments advanced by the Mitterrand and Major governments for continuing an arms embargo that never validly applied to Bosnia since it violates the inherent rights of Bosnia, a recognized, independent member of the UN, to receive arms for its self-defense. The Clinton administration, at its outset, strongly opposed the embargo, but characteristically reversed itself under European pressure, just

when European policies in the Balkans and the embargo itself had become admitted failures. The administration now is making an all-out effort to silence doubts and to muster the Pentagon and the intelligence community in support of the failed policy.

Besides rigorously examining the old bad arguments for starving the victims of means of self-defense, the new Congress should outflank the administration by going to the heart of the problem: the persistent failure of Europe and the UN bureaucracy, since May 1992, even to try enforcing the valid ban on Serbia's reinforcement and resupply of its proxies in Bosnia and Croatia. Russia has been in the lead of Britain and France in an effort to legalize Serbia's reinforcement and resupply of its proxies, even though that puts U.S. and other NATO airmen as well as UN peacekeepers at risk and would make even riskier a complex and dangerous operation of withdrawing them.

That operation in particular would bring out an essential connection between the changes these two pieces of legislation should make. For a dangerous operation engaging so many American foot soldiers and airmen, it would be essential for U.S. commanders to be in control of the campaign and to be able to decide (without UN second-guessing) on when, where and how to suppress enemy capabilities to disrupt the operation and inflict serious harm on our own and allied forces.

#### **ENDNOTES - Wohlstetter - Boris Yeltsen as Abraham Lincoln?**

1. As Yeltsin writes: "Grachev raised his hand and addressed me, slowly squeezing out the words: 'Boris Nikolayevich, are you giving me sanction to use tanks in Moscow?' I looked at him in silence. . . . 'I'll send you a written order'." See Boris Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia*, trans. Catherin A. Fitzpatrick, New York: Times Books, 1994, p. 278.