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# There's A Bear In The Woods!

By Scott Lilly  
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A Russian officer walks past a destroyed building in Tskhinvali, the capital of the Georgian breakaway enclave of South Ossetia.

Since the Vietnam War, conservatives in the United States have pummeled moderates and progressives on the issue of national security. In one dispute after another, they have fashioned themselves as Winston Churchills while their opponents were naïve and incompetent Neville Chamberlains. Repeatedly they have driven home the message that their opponents were clueless as to the dangerous nature of the world we live in, and unwilling to use the force that might be necessary to cope with that danger.

That is why it is the ultimate irony that it was President George W. Bush and his hard-line foreign policy team who were asleep at the switch when the Russian Bear awoke from its slumber and resumed its preoccupation with empire. It is hard to say whether this administration's flatfooted response would be more contemptible if it were attributed to the administration's failure to anticipate Russia's actions or if U.S. officials knew in advance of Russia's preparations but could concoct no response more effective than the one we have witnessed.

What is certain is that while Bush's old friend, Vladimir Putin, rushed home from the Beijing Olympic games to manage the unfolding of events which he had quite clearly been planning for months if not years, while "the sports-loving Bush," according to the Associated Press, "refused to let the fighting completely ruin his trip as the first sitting American president to attend an Olympics on foreign soil."

What is also certain is that the guns of August 2008 have in a matter of a few days significantly changed the world we live in. It is now clear to almost everyone that Russian objectives go well beyond the issue of the ethnically Russian citizens of South Ossetia. Moscow's swift military gambit clearly includes "regime change" for the entire nation of Georgia.

That is important not simply because Georgia's democratically elected president, Mikhail Saakashvili, is far more pro-western than his eventual Russian-picked successor will be, but also because it sends a clear message throughout the region that Russia can do what it pleases--and that the United States is too weak, too overstretched, too unpopular, and too weary from years of failed international exploits to act.

That is a message that will be heard first in Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Ukraine. Leaders such as Azeri Prime Minister Ilham Aliyev will go to considerable lengths to avoid the fate that apparently awaits Saakashvili. They will see the value of alliance with the United States in greatly diminished terms. All will urgently seek ways to accommodate Russian interests.

But the message will extend beyond those countries. Iran and Turkey will be forced to recognize that Russia is reemerging as a force in their region, and that their economic and security interests in the future will have to be more closely harmonized with those of Russia. Former Soviet Republics such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will be far wearier of entanglements with the United States that might provoke Russian displeasure.

The apparent helplessness of the United States to respond in behalf of a

nation that we have publically taken in our arms as an ally is in part the product of a war that has not only squandered our national security resources but has left us with virtually no reserves to contend with problems that might erupt in other parts of the world.

That failing is one that national security experts ranging from the center to the left of the political spectrum have warned about repeatedly. We now have no division in reserve or even a brigade. Whether we would have or should have used our military resources in behalf of Georgia is a legitimate question but from Putin's vantage point it was not at issue. His adventure could be launched with assurance that U.S. military resources were not in play.

We have provided aid and comfort to the Russian invaders in other ways, too. We have established a new standard that nations must meet before crossing the sovereign boundaries of other nations—trumped up charges based on manufactured intelligence will do nicely. Our diplomatic standing to challenge Russia's irresponsible meddling is even weaker than our military standing.

This dismal state of affairs should remind neocons, moderates, and progressives alike of the 1984 Reagan re-election campaign ad—one of the classic television ads of all time. The script was as follows:

There is a bear in the woods.

For some people the bear is easy to see.

Others don't see it at all.

Some people say the bear is tame. Others say it's vicious and dangerous.

Since no one can really be sure who's right, isn't it smart to be as strong as the bear? If there is a bear?

Georgia proves that there is a bear in the woods. Among those who did not see the bear was the conservative president of the United States, who with his many "hard-line" advisors looked into Vladimir Putin's eye and "found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy...I was able to get a sense of his soul." According to Bush their meeting was, "the beginning of a very constructive relationship."

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