

Biden Told the Truth: Putin Has to Go

By Garry Kasparov

[This essay appeared in the 4apr22 edition of Wall Street Journal.]

Russia's all-out war on Ukraine is entering its sixth week, and the past few days have seen a rhetorical shift in [Vladimir Putin](#)'s goals. Since the Kremlin lies about everything, real evidence of a Russian retreat or any change in posture is always necessary. Still, it feels like confirmation of battlefield observations that the Russian army has been thwarted in its primary objectives and will now attempt to salvage a disastrous military effort with a successful negotiation. As my former world championship challenger Nigel Short once said about peace offerings, "If your opponent offers you a draw, try to work out why he thinks he's worse off." It would also fit Mr. Putin's usual tactic of taking territory by force and then pivoting to diplomacy to secure his gains. Whether it's feint or fiction, the pressure by Ukraine and its allies on Russia must only increase. Kharkiv and Mariupol now resemble the gutted ruins Mr. Putin created in Aleppo and Grozny. Yet the weapons Ukraine needs to stop long-range artillery, missile attacks and aerial bombing are still being held back by the U.S. and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization nations.

That should be the real story, not any controversy about President Biden saying Mr. Putin "cannot remain in power." No free-world leader should hesitate to state plainly that the world would be a far better place if Mr. Putin were no longer in charge in Russia, and one way to help make that come about is to say it. Making it clear that Russia will be a pariah until Mr. Putin is gone is the best way to shake his support among elites, military commanders and ordinary Russians.

The problem came when the White House attempted to walk back the remark, calling it an ad lib that did not reflect a U.S. policy about "regime change" in Russia. This retreat added fuel to my concerns about an internal split in the White House between those who sense the opportunity to toss Mr. Putin into the dust bin of

history and those who are afraid of any change in the status quo and who would rather deal with the devil they know.

The latter would be an echo of 1991, when President George H.W. Bush gave his infamous “Chicken Kyiv” speech, reportedly penned by Condoleezza Rice, cautioning Ukraine against rushing to independence from the Soviet Union. Three weeks later Ukraine ignored that advice and declared independence. The Soviet Union collapsed within months.

The updated 2022 recipe calls for keeping Mr. Putin at the negotiating table for the Iran nuclear deal and not giving Ukraine the jets and other offensive weapons it needs to win the war. Everything I hear from other NATO members is that the U.S. has become the obstacle, and an explanation is required. Allowing Mr. Putin to keep an inch of Ukrainian soil after bombing civilians should be unimaginable. Conceding large areas of eastern Ukraine to the invader in exchange for a cease-fire would only give Mr. Putin time to consolidate and rearm for next time—and there will always be a next time. No peace deal should weaken the strong sanctions that have finally arrived, eight years late.

The only drawback to the end of the Cold War was the loss of the moral clarity provided by a clear and present evil. Aside from a handful of fellow travelers and useful idiots, even Ronald Reagan’s critics couldn’t doubt the accuracy of his calling the Soviet Union “an evil empire” in a 1983 speech, as startling as it was to hear a politician speak so plainly in moral terms. It was also a tonic for those of us inside the Soviet Union to hear what we knew to be true said aloud by the leader of the free world.

Mr. Biden’s age may be a negative for some, but he remembers the Cold War. Gaffe or not, his remark reflected accurate instincts: Mr. Putin must go. But the war in Ukraine is also a distraction from his flailing domestic agenda. It’s hard to talk about economic and social issues in the U.S. when a real war is leading the news every night.

So who in Washington is calling the shots on Ukraine? If the Biden administration wants Ukraine to win, someone in the White House should say it and do what is necessary to make it possible. If the U.S. is offering deals to Mr. Putin or pressuring Ukraine to accept anything less than sovereignty over 100% of its territory, we should know. Tactical ambiguity can be useful, but a lack of strategic and moral unity and consistency leads to catastrophe.

Mr. Putin's Russia is a bankrupt gas station run by a mafia that prefers to spend its time and money in London and New York. Offering any carrots to these war criminals would set the stage for a return to the appeasement and corruption that brought us to this deadly phase. It would also shake the foundation of collective defense in the region. As Latvian Defense Minister Artis Pabriks told me last week, "We are afraid not of Russian tanks, but of Western weakness."

The outcome in Ukraine will define a new world order, for good or ill. Taiwan and China are watching closely. Xi Jinping's natural alliance with his fellow dictator is looking less attractive after the free world's outpouring of support for Ukraine. The U.S. can restore its leadership of the free world, or it can lead from behind while democracy continues to lose ground.

The West fell asleep when the Cold War ended. Ukrainians are sacrificing everything to shake President Biden, the White House and the world awake.

Mr. Kasparov is chairman of the Renew Democracy Initiative.