

War with Russia?

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*'The Owl of Minerva spreads its wings
only with the falling of dusk.'*

Hegel

War With Russia?, like a biography of a living person, is a book without an end. The title is a warning – akin to what the late Gore Vidal termed “a journalistic alert-system”¹ – not a prediction. Hence the question mark. I cannot foresee the future. The book's overarching theme is informed by past and current facts, not by any political agenda, ideological commitment, or magical prescience.

To restate that theme: The new US-Russian Cold War is more dangerous than was its 40-year predecessor, which the world survived. The chances are even greater, as I hope readers already understand, that this one could result, inadvertently or intentionally, in actual war between the two nuclear superpowers. Herein lies another ominous indication. During the preceding Cold War, the possibility of nuclear catastrophe was in the forefront of American mainstream political and media discussion, and of policy-making. During the new one, it rarely seems to be even a concern.

As I finish *War With Russia?*, the facts and mounting crises they document grow worse, especially in the US political-media establishment where, as readers also understand, I think the new Cold War originated and has been repeatedly escalated. Consider finally a few examples from the latter months of 2018, some of them not unlike political and media developments during the run-up to the US war in Iraq or, historians have told us, when the great powers “sleepwalked” into World War I:

• Russiagate’s core allegations, none of them yet proven, had become a central part of the new Cold War. If nothing else, they severely constrained President Trump’s capacity to conduct crisis-negotiations with Moscow while they further vilified Russian President Putin for having, it was widely asserted, personally ordered “an attack on America” during the 2016 presidential campaign. Hollywood liberals, it will be recalled, quickly omitted the question mark, declaring, “We are at war.” In October 2018, the would-be titular head of the Democratic Party, Hillary Clinton, added her voice to this reckless allegation, flatly stating that the United States was “attacked by a foreign power” and equating it with “the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.”²

Clinton may have been prompted by another outburst of *New York Times* and *Washington Post* malpractice. On September 20 and 23 respectively, those exceptionally influential papers devoted thousands of words, illustrated with sinister prosecutorial graphics, to special retellings of the Russiagate narrative they had assiduously promoted for nearly two years, along with the narrative’s serial fallacies, selective and questionable history, and factual errors. (In the front of its issue, the *Times* reporters explained that “the goal of the project ... was to bring people back to a story they might have abandoned.”)

Again, for example, the now-infamous Paul Manafort was said to have been “pro-Kremlin” during the period at issue when in fact he was pro-European Union. Again, the disgraced General Michael Flynn was accused of “troubling” contacts when he did nothing wrong or unprecedented in having conversations with a Kremlin representative on behalf of President elect Trump. Again, the two papers criminalized the idea that “the United States and Russia should look for areas of mutual interest,” once the premise of *détente*. And again, the *Times*, while assuring readers its “Special Report” was “what we now know with certainty,” buried the nullifying acknowledgment deep in its some 10,000 words: “No public evidence has emerged showing that [Trump’s] campaign conspired with Russia.” (The white-collar criminal indictments and guilty pleas cited were so unrelated they again added up to Russiagate without Russia.)

Astonishingly, neither paper gave any credence to an emphatic statement by Bob Woodward – normally considered the most authoritative chronicler of Washington’s political secrets – that after two years of research he had found “no evidence of collusion” between Trump and Russia. Endorsing the *Post* version, a prominent historian even assured his readers that the widely discredited anti-Trump Steele dossier – the source of so many allegations – was “increasingly plausible.”^{3,4}

Nor were the *Times*, *Post*, and other print media alone in these practices, which continued to slur dissenting opinions. CNN’s leading purveyor of

Russiagate allegations tweeted that an American third-party presidential candidate had been “repeating Russian talking points on its interference in the 2016 election and on US foreign policy.”⁵ Another prominent CNN figure was, so to speak, more geopolitical, warning, “Only a fool takes Vladimir Putin at his word in Syria,” thereby ruling out US-Russian cooperation in that war-torn country.⁶ Much the same continued almost nightly on MSNBC.

For most mainstream media outlets, Russiagate had become, it seemed, a kind of cult journalism that no counter-evidence or analysis could dent – though I try in this book – and thus itself increasingly a major contributing factor to the new Cold War. Still more, what began two years earlier as complaints about Russian “meddling” in the US presidential election became by October 2018, for the *New Yorker*⁷ and other publications, including the *Times* and the *Post*, an accusation that the Kremlin had actually put Donald Trump in the White House. For this seditious charge, there was also no convincing evidence – nor any precedent in American history.

- At a higher level, by fall 2018, current and former US officials were making nearly unprecedented threats against Moscow. The ambassador to NATO threatened to “take out” any Russian missiles she thought violated a 1987 treaty, a step that would certainly risk nuclear war.⁸ The Secretary of the Interior threatened a “naval blockade” of Russia.⁹ In yet another Russophobic outburst, the soon-to-retire ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, declared that “lying, cheating and rogue behaviour” are a “norm of Russian culture.”¹⁰

These may have been outlandish statements by untutored political appointees, though they inescapably again raised the question: who was making Russia policy in Washington – President Trump with his avowed policy of “cooperation” or someone else?

But how to explain, other than as unbridled extremism, comments by a former US ambassador to Moscow, himself a longtime professor of Russian politics and favoured mainstream commentator? According to him, Russia had become a “rogue state,” its policies “criminal actions,” and the “world’s worst threat.” It had to be countered by “preemptive sanctions that would go into effect automatically” – “every day,” if deemed necessary.¹¹ Considering “crushing” sanctions then being prepared by a bipartisan group of US senators “to punish” Moscow¹², this would be nothing less than a declaration of permanent war against Russia: economic war, but war nonetheless.

- Meanwhile, other new Cold War fronts were becoming more fraught with hot war, none more so than Syria. On September 15, 2018, Syrian missiles accidentally shot down an allied Russian surveillance aircraft, killing all fifteen crew members. The cause was combat subterfuge by Israeli warplanes in the area. The reaction in Moscow was indicative – and potentially ominous.

At first, Putin, who had developed good relations with Israel’s political leadership, said the incident was an accident caused by the fog of war. His own Defence Ministry, however, loudly protested that Israel was responsible. Putin quickly retreated to a more hardline position, and in the end vowed to send to Syria Russia’s highly effective S-300 surface-to-air defence system, a prize long sought by both Syria and Iran.

Clearly, Putin was not the ever “aggressive Kremlin autocrat” unrelentingly portrayed by US mainstream media. Still a moderate in the Russian context, he again made a major decision by balancing conflicting groups and interests. In this instance, he accommodated longstanding hardliners (“hawks”) in his own security establishment.

The result was yet another Cold War tripwire. With the S-300s installed in Syria, Putin could in effect impose a “no-fly-zone” over large areas of the country, which had been ravaged by war due, in no small part, to the combat presence of several foreign powers. (Russia and Iran were there legally; the United States and Israel were not.) If so, it meant a new “red line” that Washington and its ally Israel would have to decide whether or not to cross. Considering the mania in Washington and in the mainstream media, it was hard to be confident restraint would prevail.

All this unfolded around the third anniversary of Russia’s military intervention in Syria in September 2015. At that time, Washington pundits denounced Putin’s “adventure” and were sure it would fail. Three years later, “Putin’s Kremlin” had destroyed the vicious Islamic State’s grip on significant parts of Syria, for which it still got no credit in Washington; all but restored President Assad’s control over most of the country; and made itself the ultimate arbiter of Syria’s future. In keeping with his Russia policy, President Trump probably was inclined to join Moscow’s peace process, though it was unlikely the mostly Democratic Russiagate party would permit him to do so. (For perspective, recall that, in 2016, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton called for a US no-fly zone over Syria to defy Russia.)

- As I finish this book, another Cold War front also became more fraught. The US-Russian proxy war in Ukraine acquired a new dimension. In

addition to the civil war in Donbass, Moscow and Kiev began challenging the other's ships in the Sea of Azov, near the vital Ukrainian port of Mariupol. Trump was being pressured to supply Kiev with naval and other weapons to wage this evolving maritime war, yet another potential tripwire. Here too the president should instead have put his administration's weight behind the long-stalled Minsk peace accords. But that approach also seemed ruled out by Russiagate, which by October 2018 included yet another *Times* columnist, Frank Bruni, branding all such initiatives by Trump "pimping for Putin."¹³

After five years of extremism exemplified by these more recent examples of risking war with Russia, there remained, for the first time in decades of Cold War history, no countervailing forces in Washington – no *pro-détente* wing of the Democratic or Republican Party, no influential anti-Cold War opposition anywhere, no real public debate. There was only Trump, with all the loathing he inspired, and even he had not reminded the nation or his own party that the presidents who initiated major episodes of *détente* in the 20th century were also Republicans–Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan. This too seemed to be an inadmissible "alternative fact."

And so the eternal question, not only for Russians: what is to be done? There was a ray of light, though scarcely more. In August 2018, Gallup asked Americans what kind of policy toward Russia they favoured. Even amid the torrent of vilifying Russiagate allegations and Russophobia, 58 per cent wanted "to improve relations with Russia" as opposed to 36 per cent preferring "strong diplomatic and economic steps against Russia."¹⁴

This reminds us that the new Cold War, from NATO's eastward expansion and the Ukrainian crisis to Russiagate, has been an elite project. Why, after the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, US elites ultimately chose Cold War rather than partnership with Russia is a question beyond the limits of this book and perhaps my ability to answer. As for the role of US intelligence elites, what I have termed Intelgate, efforts are still under way to disclose it fully, and being thwarted.¹⁵

A full explanation of the Cold War choice would include the political-media establishment's needs – ideological, foreign-policy, budgetary, among others – for an "enemy."¹⁶ Or, Cold War having prevailed for more than half of US-Russian relations during the century since 1917, maybe it was habitual. Substantial "meddling" in the 2016 election by Ukraine and Israel, to illustrate the point, did not become a political scandal.¹⁷ In any event, once this approach to post-Soviet Russia began, promoting it was not hard. The legendary humorist Will Rogers quipped back in the 1930s, "Russia is a country that no matter what you say about it, it's true." Back

then, before the 40-year Cold War and nuclear weapons, the quip was funny, but no longer.

Whatever the full explanation, many of the consequences I have analyzed along the way continue to unfold, not a few unintended and unfavourable to America's real national interests. Russia's turn away from the West, its "pivot to China," is now widely acknowledged and embraced by many Moscow policy thinkers.¹⁸ Even European allies occasionally stand with Moscow against Washington.¹⁹ The US-backed Kiev government still covers up who was really behind the 2014 Maidan "snipers' massacre" that brought it to power.²⁰ Mindless US sanctions have helped Putin to repatriate oligarchic assets abroad, an estimated \$90 billion already in 2018.²¹ Mainstream media persist in distorting Putin's foreign policies into something "that even the Soviet Union never dared to try."²² And when an anonymous White House "insider" exposed in the *Times* "the president's amorality," the only actual policy he or she singled out was Russia policy.²³

I have focused enough on the surreal demonizing of Putin – the *Post* even managed to characterize popular support for his substantial contribution to improving life in Moscow as "a deal with the devil" – but it is important to note that this "derangement" is far from world-wide.²⁴ Even a *Post* correspondent conceded that "the Putin brand has captivated anti-establishment and anti-American politicians all over the world."²⁵ A worldly British journalist confirmed that as a result "many countries in the world now look for a reinsurance policy with Russia."²⁶ And an American journalist living in Moscow reported that "ceaseless demonization of Putin personally has in fact sanctified him, turned him into the Patron Saint of Russia."²⁷

Again, in light of all this, what can be done? Sentimentally, and with some historical precedents, we of democratic beliefs traditionally look to "the people," to voters, to bring about change. But foreign policy has long been the special prerogative of elites. In order to change Cold War policy fundamentally, leaders are needed. When the times beckon, they may emerge out of established, even deeply conservative, elites, as did unexpectedly Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s. But given the looming danger of war with Russia, is there time? Is any leader visible on the American political landscape who will say to his or her elite and party, as Gorbachev did, "If not now, when? If not us, who?"

We also know that such leaders, though embedded in and insulated by their elites, hear and read other, non-conformist voices, other thinking. The once-venerated American journalist Walter Lippmann observed, "When all think alike, no one is thinking." This book is my modest attempt to inspire more thinking.

NOTES

1. Victor Navasky and Katrina vanden Heuvel, eds., *The Best of The Nation*, New York, 2000, p. xvii
2. Reported by Felicia Sonmez, *washingtonpost.com*, October 2, 2018
3. Woodward, *realclearpolitics*, September 14, 2018
4. Kai Bird, *The Washington Post*, September 30 2018
5. Jim Sciutto, Tweet, May 1, 2018
6. Nie Robertson, CNN.com, September 18, 2018
7. Jane Mayer, October 1, 2018, pp. 18-26
8. Kay Bailey Hutchison quoted by *businessinsider.com*, October 2
9. *southfront.org*, September 30
10. Michael Schwartz, *nytimes.com*, September 17
11. Michael McFaul, *washingtonpost.com*, September 28, 2018
12. *Washington Post* editorial, September 9
13. *New York Times*, October 7
14. *news.gallup.com/polV241124*
15. On September 22, 2018, the *Times* reported that Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein had proposed secretly recording President Trump. Rosenstein denied the report, but the *Times* did not retract its story. On the same day, the *Times* also reported that intelligence agencies had dissuaded the president from declassifying documents directly related to Intelgate.
16. Two leading geopolitical thinkers have presented at least partial explanations. See John Mearsheimer, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014; and Anatol Lieven, *Survival*, Vol. 60, issue 5, 2018
17. See, e.g., Kenneth P. Vogel and David Stern, *politico.com*, January 11, 2017; and Aaron Mate, *TheNation.com*, December 5, 2017
18. Sergei Karaganov, *Johnson's Russia List*, September 24, 2018
19. Andrew Rettman, *euobserver.com*, September 26, 2018
20. Ivan Katchanovski, *Johnson's Russia List*, September 17, 2018
21. Tyler Durden, *ibid.*, September 24, 2018
22. Jackson Diehl, *Washington Post*, March 19, 2018
23. *New York Times* opinion page, September 6, 2018
24. Anton Troianovski, *Washington Post*, September 9, 2018
25. Anton Troianovski, *washingtonpost.com*, July 12, 2018
26. Patrick Cockburn, *Johnson's Russia List*, September 24, 2018
27. Jeffrey Tayler, *theatlantic.com*, March 18, 2018