

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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American Exceptionalism, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin

America is exceptional and unique. Its exceptionalism has a moral, an ethical, a spiritual and a political dimension to it. There really is no other nation quite like the US—and that is at the heart of its exceptionalism. Let me highlight a few of these distinctive aspects. The United States was birthed as a nation when two powerful forces came together in the 18th century—the desire for both political liberty and religious liberty. The 13 colonies of Great Britain were each planted separately and for different reasons. Each developed uniquely with diverse institutions. The first unifying event in the colonies was the First Great Awakening, which occurred during the 1720s through the 1760s. Virtually every person in the 13 colonies was affected by this revival, especially through the ministry of George Whitefield. Historians have long documented the enormous impact of this revival—denominationalism, a desire for the separation of church and state, and a strong sense of the spiritual significance of life. Religious liberty emerged as a core value of the colonies as every expression of the Protestant Reformation came to America. The pluralism of choice ensured that there would be no established church and that religious conscience would be protected. The commitment to political liberty came from the European Enlightenment, and the Declaration of Independence, penned by Jefferson, offers the best example of this. As historian Henry May has argued in *The Enlightenment in America*, the revival of the First Awakening balanced the Enlightenment, producing what he called America's Moderate Enlightenment, which emphasized balance, order and freedom. There was no guillotine in America. Further, Abraham Lincoln, in the Emancipation Proclamation and in his Gettysburg Address, applied these life-changing principles to slavery and declared that the Civil War was not only about preserving the Union; it was about applying "all men are created equal" to the African-American slave. They would be freed. This same understanding was applied to women and their enfranchisement through the 19th Amendment. America is something new in human history and it is quite **exceptional**. That is why tens-of-millions of human beings have sought passage to America, the land of freedom. People are not beating down the doors to get into Russia; we still have millions of people who would do anything to come to America. The Russian Revolution of 1917 with its radical Marxism-Leninism and its militant atheism almost destroyed Putin's nation. Russia is still reeling from that horrific experiment in communist radicalism.

But is America losing its exceptional uniqueness? The irreplaceable combination of religious liberty and political liberty that produced the Independence movement and the gradual expansion of what "all men are created equal" really means, is deteriorating into a destructive embrace of Postmodern autonomy, relativism and radical pluralism. Our values, morals and ethical standards now resemble the socialist nations of Europe. Individual initiative and trust

are being replaced by an entitlement mentality that eats away at liberty and freedom. I believe that we should defend the notion of American exceptionalism in a robust and forceful manner, but with humility. Our nation is a product of unique forces, including the providence of God. In seeking to build a friendship with Russia's Vladimir Putin, I believe that President Trump is undermining the exceptionalism of America. Let me explain. In a recent interview with Bill O'Reilly, Trump suggested a moral equivalency between the United States and Vladimir Putin's Russia. O'Reilly condemned Putin "as a killer," to which Trump replied "We've got a lot of killers. What do you think? Our country's so innocent?" Many objective, intellectually honest Americans would have every right to call Trump's equivalency moral treason! Trump seems to be leveling a moral indictment of the nation he leads! As *Wall Street Journal* columnist Bret Stephens correctly argues, "In this reading, Mr. Putin's behavior isn't so different from ours. It's largely the same, except more honest and effective." This is the same charge the radical left was making in the 1960s and 1970s during the heights of the Viet Nam war (see comments by Jane Fonda, Tom Hayden, etc.). David Satter of the Hudson Institute appropriately observes that "Never before has an American president implied that political murder is acceptable or that the US is guilty of similar crimes." Consider these developments in Putin's Russia:

- Last week Vladimir Kara-Murza, a political activist and journalist, was hospitalized with symptoms of poisoning. The motive for the poisoning may lie in statements he made to the US Senate over the egregious human rights violations in Putin's Russia. Kara-Murza is in a coma, suffering organ failure and fighting for his life.
- On 27 February 2015, Boris Nemtsov, the leader of the Russian opposition, was shot dead as he crossed the Moskvoetsky Bridge in the shadow of the Kremlin in Moscow.
- Alexei Navalny (a prominent blogger) and Mikhail Kasyanov (former prime minister) have been physically attacked.
- In Trump's observation about the moral equivalency between the US and Russia, he is in effect aiding the elaborate and effective propaganda machine of Vladimir Putin. "Mr. Trump's statements suggesting that Russia and America are similar in abusing human rights and the US also has 'killers' will be quoted by the [Russian] government, state-run media and other anti-opposition forces for years." Trump's comments also undermine America's moral authority, making it more difficult to hold Russia accountable for its atrocities in Syria and Ukraine.

Satter is certainly correct when he argues, ". . . Mr. Trump's 'respect' for Mr. Putin leaves little room for criticism. If the US president is not concerned about political murders, what basis does he have for objecting to the indiscriminate meting out of death from the air? . . . Mr. Trump's readiness to condone murder in the pursuit of an ill-advised US-Russia partnership suggests that he doesn't see the difference between a defensive war and the murder of one's own people to hold on to power."

President Trump organized his campaign around the phrase, "Make America Great Again." I assume he still sees that as one of the key goals of his administration. His pursuit of Vladimir Putin at any cost undermines his credibility, undermines the exceptionalism of American civilization and destroys the moral and ethical authority of the United States in the world today. There is no moral equivalency between the United States and Russia. Trump defies all reasonableness and all common sense in arguing that there is. He should be ashamed of himself.

See Max Fisher in www.washingtonpost.com (12 September 2013); Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (14-15 September 2013); David Satter in the *Wall Street Journal* (7 February 2017); and Bret Stephens in the *Wall Street Journal* (7 February 2017).