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Lame Duck Senate Shouldn't Ratify NATO's Inclusion Of Corrupt, Military Midget Montenegro

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Historically countries made alliances to improve their defense or otherwise advance important security interests. In contrast, the U.S. uses NATO as a form of international welfare, inducting nations with little military capability or even economic strength. The latest recipient of defense charity is expected to be Montenegro, whose membership application influential Senators hope to rush through the lame duck session.

Montenegro is a postage stamp nation with the population of one congressional district. It is located in the unstable, brutal, and nationalistic Balkans, the fount of so much conflict and hardship throughout history. Montenegrins never had an easy time of it, with the Turks, Russians, Serbs, Italians, and Austro-Hungarians all fighting for regional dominance at different times.

But a fascinating if slightly off-color history is no argument for NATO membership. The finest compliment that can be paid to Montenegro today is that it doesn't matter internationally. A notoriously corrupt enclave that split off from Serbia a decade ago, Montenegro mimics the Duchy of Grand Fenwick in *The Mouse that Roared*, only hoping to get rich by joining NATO rather than by fighting America.

It should not surprise anyone that officials in Podgorica want to get on the transatlantic gravy train. Last week a new government was sworn after messy elections in October. Newly installed Prime Minister Dusko Markovic said his government expected to complete the accession process this coming spring, and that membership would "provide the level of security we haven't had in the past." He added that he hoped to "overcome misunderstandings with our historic ally Russia," as if the NATO was directed against some country other than Russia.

In fact, the transatlantic alliance won't safeguard Montenegro, which is threatened by no one. But membership will offer official status and further open the financial spigots, since Washington is expected to generously assist new members. Alas, it might take some work to ensure that the money does not get siphoned off in a country some have termed a "mafia state." In fact, the previous prime minister, who effectively served for most of a quarter century, Milo Djukanovic, had a "long history of corrupt and criminal activity," noted analyst James Nadeau. In fact, Djukanovic was known as "Mr. Ten Percent."

Still, might Montenegro's inclusion provide some benefit to other alliance members? Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael R. Carpenter offered studied nonsense when he testified to Montenegro's many virtues before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. The military now is interoperable with NATO forces, he declared, as if that was a reason to protect another nation. Montenegro shared the alliance's "values of democracy, individual liberty, and the rule of law," even though they are rarely evident in Montenegrin politics.

The vanishingly small armed forces would "be a net contributor to the security of the Euro-Atlantic area," a line more appropriate for stand-up comedy than a congressional hearing. Finally, he claimed, "perhaps most importantly, Montenegro's membership will also bring the Alliance one step closer to realizing the strategic vision of a Europe, whole, free and at peace." How bringing a corrupt military midget into NATO would do so Carpenter left unexplained.

After the Ukraine crisis alliance members have begun to worry that they might actually have to fight Russia. Could Montenegro at least help in this regard? The scenic micro-state has a military of not quite 2000 personnel. The armed forces are organized around internal security. Sounds like the ally America desperately requires.

Some advocates of Montenegrin membership point out that the country has access to the Adriatic. But Podgorica had shown no inclination to invite in its "historic ally" Russia whom the government is cheerfully double-crossing. Nor is it clear what Moscow would do with a base even if provided, given NATO's naval superiority.

In fact, there's no better evidence that the alliance is "obsolete," as candidate Trump opined, than its determination to induct the Grand Fenwick look-alike. The U.S. collects allies like most Americans collect Facebook Friends. At least the latter don't cost anything. Not so NATO "allies" which are constantly clamoring for American money, troops, attention, and reassurance.

President Barack Obama called for Senate ratification to "demonstrate to other countries in the Balkans and beyond that NATO's door remains open to nations that undertake the reforms necessary to meet NATO's requirements and contribute to the security of the alliance" and as "yet another milestone in advancing the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Balkans." Yet this is meaningless boilerplate at best. As noted earlier, Podgorica's accession does not advance regional or alliance security, and past "reforms" in the gangster state look cosmetic at best.

Nor does it make sense to bring into NATO unqualified countries to demonstrate an "open door" to theoretically qualified ones. And which are the latter? Presumably Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia, which all remain outside the alliance. True, some of their militaries are a bit larger—8000, 0, 10,500, and 28,150, respectively—but none matter much.

Bosnia isn't a real country, but a bitterly-divided political artifact held together by outside pressure. Kosovo is both divided and corrupt, and is not even officially recognized by many states. Macedonia/FYROM remains mired in a bitter name dispute with Greece. And Serbia, having been targeted and dismembered by NATO in a brutal act of collective aggression nearly two decades ago, remains close to Moscow.

As for Balkan integration, it should be a European, not a Euro-Atlantic project. What was the European Union designed for but to join small, fractious, and unimportant parts of that continent

with the major players? Yet the EU doesn't seem as enthusiastic as the Obama administration about integrating the Balkans. If that organization doesn't want to hurry, why the NATO rush in Washington? Not everything on earth is America's responsibility. Really.

Perhaps most disturbing of all, inducting Montenegro would give the corrupt military midget influence in Brussels. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said approvingly: "Membership will give Montenegro the ability to help shape NATO policy." Why is that good? Montenegro is precisely the sort of state which should have no say over action by the most powerful alliance in history.

The Obama administration's real agenda may appear at the end of Carpenter's testimony: "Montenegro's NATO membership will be a powerful rebuke to Russia's malign influence in the Western Balkans and demonstrate that no country has a veto over NATO's decision to admit new members." Vladimir Putin is no friend of human liberty, but so what? Adding new members of minimal military value in order to consciously antagonize the one power that is supposedly threatening Europe is a bizarre tactic. It certainly doesn't help maintain the peace.

Look at a map. The Balkans obviously is of more interest to Russia and Europe than to America. Adding Podgorica to NATO would make the world more dangerous for the U.S. in order to take a symbolic slap at Moscow. Foreign policy elites in Washington might enjoy the spectacle, but other Americans would pay the price of increased tensions and any conflict that resulted.

Thus, inducting Montenegro is a big deal. Yet rather than encourage a serious debate, Sen. Benjamin Cardin (D-Md.), Ranking Member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is trying to push ratification through the lame duck session. Montenegro's accession "should be noncontroversial, and we still have time to get it done," he declared. If the GOP leadership fails to follow Cardin's plan, "we play right into Putin's hands," he claimed. No doubt, at this very moment Russian President Vladimir Putin is drinking himself into a stupor in his underground Kremlin bunker out of fear that Podgorica's vast armada will soon be arrayed against Russia. Moscow's surrender is merely a matter of time—if only the GOP acts now.

Sen. Chris Coons (D-Del.) made an only slightly less bizarre argument. Washington should "take actions that strengthen the vitality of NATO, that show a bipartisan willingness to push back on Russia's threats against Ukraine and actions in the Middle East." How does bringing in a military and political lightweight demonstrate alliance "vitality"? And how does doing so "push back" against supposed threats against Ukraine (not a member of NATO) and actions in the Mideast (involving a civil war irrelevant to American security)?

Montenegro currently is on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's agenda for Tuesday. Chairman Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) should put off any vote until next session. Expanding U.S. military commitments is serious business. Adding a country with significant governance issues that would add nothing to U.S. security is dubious business. Legislators should give the issue more than five minutes thought.

And if the measure makes it to the floor, it deserves a decision on the record, rather a voice vote, by which Albania and Croatia were rushed through in 2009. The American people should know which legislators are putting foreign interests before their security.

Candidate Donald Trump got NATO right. It no longer serves America's defense. He should insist that the Senate hold off approving Montenegro's accession until he can review the future of the alliance. Someone should speak on behalf of the American people who are expected to pay for everyone else.

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