



Waging Proxy War in Ukraine Won't Save Us From Ourselves

The policing of public opinion over Ukraine goes to extremes unimagined during the fight against Hitler.

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America has been involved in a crisis of conscience for some time. Most of our recent political controversies have ended in denunciations and upheavals that seem off the charts by the standard of all previous American experience outside war. Consider the right-wing birther movement, which questioned the authenticity of President Obama's citizenship, and the left-liberal Russiagate scandal, which accused President Trump of being a Russian agent. The loudest voices leveling these charges came from people with no interest in evidence. Rather, the accusations served their purpose within the factions that constitute the "base" of the major parties.

Barack Obama, a few years into his presidency, got into the habit of saying (in a tight spot when Americans seemed to support a bad cause): "It's not who we are as a people." But do we know who we are as a people? On March 3, the Metropolitan Opera severed its relations with the singer Anna Netrebko because, in speaking out against the Ukraine war, she failed to denounce Russian President Vladimir Putin and said a word in defense of artistic freedom:

I am opposed to this war. I am Russian and I love my country but I have many friends in Ukraine and the pain and suffering right now breaks my heart. I want this war to end and for people to be able to live in peace.... I want to add, however: forcing artists, or any public figure, to voice their political opinions in public and to denounce their homeland is not right.

Would any foreign artist in living memory have been so publicly dishonored for not reciting the prepared script?

According to a July 2020 Cato Institute poll, almost two out of three Americans are afraid to voice their political opinions because they fear they might offend someone. They save those opinions for election time—and we should not be surprised that the results of elections surprise us. In 2016, the result turned into a permanent shock—a slow-rolling, everlasting panic—for Democrats. The same happened to Republicans in 2020. Constitutional democracy requires a peaceful transfer of power following free elections. This, in turn, depends on the custom that losers concede with grace and winners are allowed their innings. But a great many Democrats, led by Hillary Clinton, were persuaded that the 2016 election had been stolen by Putin. Four years later, a majority of Republicans, led by Donald Trump, came to believe that the 2020

election was stolen by some combination of illegal ballot-harvesting, deliberate miscounts, and tampering with computers.

Both eruptions portended the loss of a national morale and discipline. If you were a foreign leader looking at the United States, you would say to yourself: “That is an unstable country; that is a troubled people. How can we enter into agreements with people who do not trust themselves?”

On May 13, Steny Hoyer, the Democratic majority leader in the House of Representatives, said that the US is now “at war” with Russia. Congressional Republicans were overwhelming, and Democrats unanimous, in voting for a \$40 billion war-assistance package to be sent to Ukraine. Apparently without any serious debate, we find ourselves on the brink of all-out war in defense of a favored nation, against a nuclear-armed power, Russia.

Recall that Ukraine was the source of the information that launched the first impeachment of President Trump, and that Trump’s offense took the form of an extortionate demand for information about the salary paid by a Ukrainian energy firm, Burisma Holdings, in return for unexplained services by the son of our current president, Joe Biden. It is at points like this that Roman orators would break off a speech with a silence that signified: “Words fail me.”

George Washington said in his Farewell Address: “The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism.”

Concerning the division of other nations into friend and enemy, Washington added: “Nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded.... The peace often, sometimes perhaps the liberty, of nations, has been the victim.”

Washington’s warning applies with summary accuracy to American foreign policy since 2001.

Today we are far gone in “passionate attachments” and “inveterate antipathies.” But while we instruct the world in democracy, our own politics has become a scene of uninhibited aggression that undermines our standing as instructors. One party refuses to dissociate itself from the riot that burst into the Capitol and sought to disrupt the certification of the 2020 election vote. The other party answers the sudden increase of shootings in American cities after June 2020 by blaming it on Covid.

What we have seen in the last 10 years, intensified in the last five, and raised to a fever pitch in the last two, is the ascent of mob psychology and hysteria on an exorbitant scale. It shows in our lazy, frightened acceptance of censorship—lately elevated to the point where Facebook and Twitter could jointly announce a ban on all messages, news, and communications that “undermine trust in the Ukrainian government.” This kind of blackout was considered beneath our dignity in the fight against Hitler and the Cold War.

The US proxy war in Ukraine, and the bipartisan self-satisfaction with which many Americans regard it, is an exercise of displacement. We are risking a world war in the belief that only a world war can repair our broken democracy. But are we so helpless? And are we so important? If we could decide “who we are as a people,” we might go some way to reduce the terrible

destruction of another war. We might even earn thanks from the billions who are not Americans but who are compelled to share the planet with us.