



## No, We Don't Need To Become More Like Putin To Contain Him

Illiberalism in the defense of liberalism is a vice.

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Anne Applebaum, an author whose Central European perspective and longtime aversion to Russian revanchism I share, has an almost comically pessimistic piece in *The Atlantic* positing that, "Unless democracies defend themselves, the forces of autocracy will destroy them." The essay serves as a useful reminder that civilizational apocalypticism is hardly limited to the right-populist Flight 93 Election set and that the centrist/interventionist fun-house-mirror image has not learned the post-9/11 lesson that wise policy does not automatically tumble forth from mashing the Do Something button.

"Russia is not the only nation in the world that covets its neighbors' territory, that seeks to destroy entire populations, that has no qualms about the use of mass violence," Applebaum warns in a statement that has never not been true since the advent of nations. "North Korea can attack South Korea at any time, and has nuclear weapons that can hit Japan. China seeks to eliminate the Uyghurs as a distinct ethnic group, and has imperial designs on Taiwan."

That indeed sounds scary. Now rewrite that passage after spinning the wheel and landing on any other year in history. Here's a stab at 1948: "North Korea can attack South Korea at any time (and in fact will in 1950, leading to *3 million deaths*, including 54,000 Americans). China is on the verge of a communist revolution, and the Soviet Union just engineered a coup in Czechoslovakia and a blockade of West Berlin while beginning the process of Stalinist show trials across all its imperial holdings. Five Arab nations have attacked the newly formed country of Israel, Mahatma Gandhi has just been assassinated, India and Pakistan remain at war, South Africa has just instituted apartheid, the Greek civil war rages on, and most of Europe still lies in shambles." Do I really need to go on?

We are always, one supposes, only one bad sneeze away from an all-out thermonuclear war, so I get why that can make some people jittery in 2022. (Russian President Vladimir Putin isn't helping such anxieties by generating such headlines as "Russian planes 'armed with nukes' chased out of Swedish airspace.")

But it shows a shocking lack of faith in the wealth, power, and institutions of the free world to gaze upon Putin's military stalemate against a drastically outgunned non-nuclear power with no usable security guarantees and declare that unless democracies make some big changes pronto,

Asia's brutal, behemoth backwaters will not just continue murdering people in their neighborhoods but literally "destroy" us all.

Like political apocalypticism everywhere, this rhetorical device is designed to frighten people into supporting choices that in calmer times would be unthinkable. And like panicked (or opportunistic) proposals after 9/11, Applebaum's are filled with government-led force and mobilizations, including those patterned directly on what *didn't* work 20 years ago.

"Much as we assembled the Department of Homeland Security out of disparate agencies after 9/11," she writes, unpromisingly, "we now need to pull together the disparate parts of the U.S. government that think about communication, not to do propaganda but to reach more people around the world with better information and to stop autocracies from distorting that knowledge."

Where to start? "The Department of Homeland Security is a mess of misconduct and ineptitude," J.D. Tuccille wrote here in 2019, keying off an inspector general report. In fact, a former senior DHS official wrote a detailed piece for *Reason* in 2015 about "why we should eliminate" it.

And though it's largely been memory-holed, 9/11, too, saw the creation of a bunch of new government-funded, foreign-language, please-don't-call-it-propaganda media outlets. How did those go? Here are our findings from 2011:

In the last ten years you have paid for the Al-Hurra TV network, the Sawa radio network and the teen magazine Hi, among other State Department media ventures in the Arab nations. The TV network has failed to gain viewers and its costs have been going up. The State Department's inspector general says the radio station has failed to fulfill its mandate. At least the teen magazine was allowed to go out of business.

Applebaum wants to "stop autocracies from distorting...knowledge," but democracies do plenty of distorting on their own, as anyone who has followed Washington's COVID-related messaging can attest. Governmental attempts to quash disinformation very easily become governmental successes in quashing dissent.

A perhaps-surprising commonality between Applebaum and the American populists who tend to despise her is that both camps think trading with China was a mistake. "*Trading with autocrats promotes autocracy, not democracy*," she italicizes. But Russia's invasion, and its subsequent ejection from the liberal trading order, suggests another conclusion entirely: Maybe autocratic countries, seeing the privations exacted on Russia not just by members of the World Trade Organization but by individuals and companies, will take more seriously the negative consequences to aggressive, murderous imperialism.

As Cato Institute Director of General Economics and Trade Scott Lincicome told me recently, "The literature on the connection between trade and peace is pretty darn good. It doesn't say that trade and economic interconnectedness *prevents* armed conflict; it just simply reduces the chances of it. And there are all sorts of reasons for that."

Reasonable liberals can agree to disagree (or agree to be ambivalent) about trading with authoritarians. But Applebaum has fire in her eyes:

[W]e can go much further, because there is no reason for any company, property, or trust ever to be held anonymously. Every U.S. state, and every democratic country, should immediately make all ownership transparent. Tax havens should be illegal. The only people who need to keep their houses, businesses, and income secret are crooks and tax cheats.

This is illiberal authoritarianism in the name of fighting illiberal authoritarianism. More plainly, it's nuts. Hungary is a democracy (albeit one that Applebaum claims is "at war with us," which is an awkward move from a NATO ally)—does she really believe that only crooks in Budapest have cause to keep some of their assets out of the prying eyes of Viktor Orbán's government? Financial privacy, which has its roots in Calvinists fleeing religious persecution, is a bulwark not just against despotic governments but also against liberal democratic governments capable of behaving despotically, which is to say, all of them.

Applebaum's radical government-imposed-transparency proposal is going nowhere, thankfully. But the mindset behind it is a perennial vice. When a situation or a bad actor becomes intolerable, there is a temptation among those empathetic with the victims to let exasperation overwhelm intellect, to drive a bulldozer through every real and imagined bureaucratic, legalistic, diplomatic, or otherwise real-world obstacle.

But those obstacles are often key planks of the liberal order Applebaum claims to be defending. Dismantling them makes liberalism less worth defending.

There have been such acts of impatience all around these past five weeks, both governmental and private. Deplatforming RT, canceling performances by Russian musicians, indicating that due process niceties might be dispensed with in the seizing of Russian oligarchs' property—none of this is helpful. Lowering judicial standards and engaging in acts of collective punishment is a grotesque way of objecting to a lawless ruler inflicting deadly collective punishment as we speak.

It's not just possible but preferable to keep our liberal-democratic wits about us even as our hearts break. Russia has a long and ugly history of inflicting brutal war and authoritarian rule on countries that have the bad luck of living near the bear. A century-plus of that has produced a diminished and unloved country flanked by examples of the wealth, democracy, and resolve that come with true independence from Moscow. We need not fear such atavistic outliers; we should recognize them for the Potemkin bullies they are and mindfully protect the liberalism they're too blinkered to embrace.