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Give Peace a Chance

by Doug Bandow

03.15.2010

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Are American officials afraid of peace? The supposed peace candidate in 2008, Barack Obama has expanded the war in Afghanistan and refuses to rule out an attack on Iran. President Obama's opponent, John McCain, sang a cheery tune about bombing the latter country.

Worst of all, President George W. Bush and his top aides apparently considered attacking Russia, a one-time Cold War foe and nuclear-armed power, on behalf of the country of Georgia.

In short, the Bush administration seriously considered starting World War III.

It's one thing for the U.S., along with the rest of NATO, to beat up hapless Serbia. It wasn't even a big deal to unleash death and destruction on the decrepit Hussein dictatorship in Iraq: the occupation is what proved to be so messy. And Americans barely noticed when U.S. forces invaded tiny nations like Grenada, Haiti and Panama.

But start a war with a nuclear-armed power along the latter's border, a region of historic Russian interest? And do so to defend a nation which has no treaty relationship with America, has never been considered a security asset to the United States, and which triggered the hostilities? The policy, if not the policy makers, surely would be insane.

But as *Politico* reports in a feature on Ron Asmus's new book *The Little War That Shook the World*, senior officials in the Bush White House gave great consideration to such a policy. The issue went to the president, vice president, and other "principals," or top Cabinet officials, with proposals to use "surgical strikes," against the Kremlin, including on the Roki Tunnel from Russia's North Ossetia into South Ossetia, which had seceded from Georgia. Are U.S. policy makers mad?

First, Moscow poses no threat to America. No doubt, Vladimir Putin's Russia has taken a nasty authoritarian turn. But it is a declining power with a weakened military and shrinking population. Washington once feared the well-provisioned Soviet military. Today Moscow is buying ships from France.

Russia is not even to blame for the Georgian war. The Putin government may have provoked conflict with Georgia, but it did not

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force the Saakashvili government to fire the first shot. The war looks similar to President George H. W. Bush's invasion of Panama: a dubious venture, but one foolishly invited by an irresponsible local ruler.

Even assuming blatant aggression, Georgia, a border state that was once part of Imperial Russia as well as the Soviet Union, is a matter of peculiar geopolitical interest in Moscow. The Baltic States are not such obvious targets of Russia's coercive attention.

Moreover, the Russia-Georgia war basically exhausted Russian offensive capabilities. Moscow retains a superpower's nuclear arsenal, but little else. Today the Kremlin can barely rough up Tbilisi. Even Ukraine would not be easy for Moscow to swallow. The European Union has three times the population and ten times the GDP of Russia.

The United States has an even greater advantage. Moscow isn't going to choose war with America. Why should Washington choose war with Russia?

Second, a mere threat to go to war by the Bush administration would not likely have deterred Russia from acting. Some war advocates contended that offering Tbilisi a Membership Action Plan at the April 2008 NATO summit would have convinced Moscow not to attack Georgia. In fact, the Kremlin likely would not have taken the threat seriously, since Russia understands how difficult it would be for the allies (even if willing) to protect Georgia. And the nations most interested in defending Georgia, in Eastern Europe, are the least able to do anything for Georgia.

Moreover, to the extent that Russia thought NATO would act on its Article 5 promise to back Georgia, the Putin government would have had an increased incentive to act before Georgia actually entered the alliance. It would be better to change the facts on the ground before the West was legally committed to defend the Saakashvili government.

Third, Georgia could not be easily defended. Logistics for any expeditionary force would be difficult and jumping to air and/or missile strikes would dramatically escalate the confrontation with Russia.

Moreover, the United States would have had to act essentially alone. The Western Europeans were not ready to fight Moscow over Georgia. The Eastern Europeans might have been more willing to start World War III, but only if it would have been fought by the Americans and Western Europeans. Imagine explaining to the American people why their countrymen were dying while shooting at the Russians.

Finally, as the Bush administration apparently concluded after anguished debate, there was nothing at stake in Georgia that could conceivably justify war with Russia. The United States escaped the Cold War with minimal casualties involving Moscow. There were brutal conflicts in Korea and Vietnam. There was a frightening war scare involving Cuba. There were occasional incidents. But the two nuclear-armed powers never triggered World War III. Thankfully, they did not do so in August 2008.

It should have been an easy decision for Washington. The fact that it was not suggests that U.S. policy makers have been blinded by America's recent geopolitical domination. First, of course, Washington believes it is always right: any foreign opposition indicates moral depravity if not exceptional evil.

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Moreover, many U.S. officials and analysts apparently presume that no other country would dare challenge an American position or action if American policy makers simply demonstrated sufficient "will." In the unlikely event that another nation was foolish enough to resist, Washington would quickly and efficiently impose its will.

Alas, none of these assumptions are true. Patriots of other nations may come to different conclusions than do American policy makers. There is, for instance, no intrinsically right answer to the question of Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence. It is hard to credit Washington with anything other than arrogant hypocrisy for demanding independence for Kosovo and subservience for the two breakaway Georgian provinces.

Similarly, experience casts doubt on the assumption that only Americans believe in their positions and are willing to defend them. "Appeasement" is a vulgarity in Washington. Officials in Moscow, Beijing, Pyongyang and elsewhere likely are no fonder of the concept. Attempts by Washington to impose its will are likely to engender resistance, just as attempts by other nations to impose their will on America in the past engendered resistance.

Finally, if Iraq turned out not to be a cakewalk, imagine what war with Russia and other states would look like. Russia would lose a conventional contest, but could rely on its nuclear weapons.

China, too, remains far behind the United States in military power, but is developing a potent deterrent force capable of sinking carriers, destroying satellites, blocking nuclear threats, and undertaking asymmetric warfare. It would be foolhardy to assume that the denizens of Zhongnanhai would back down in a confrontation with the United States. Even North Korea possesses the means to wreak havoc in the South, if not to win a war. No American president would dare assume that "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il would yield if pressed.

Indeed, history suggests that America's relative military dominance is but a historical interlude. Most wars quickly look far different than as expected by those who started them. Many conflicts expand in unpredictable fashion. Rarely do tactical operations go as planned. Most conflicts, from civil to guerrilla to conventional, turn out to be far worse than expected. Washington generally has been lucky in its timing and its opponents. But that is likely to change.

This is reason enough to make war a last rather than a first result. Add to that the human and financial cost. The idea that Washington would risk nuclear war to protect Georgia after it triggered a conflict over contested territorial claims is simply mad.

It's time for a change in U.S. foreign policy. War is sometimes inevitable. Only rarely so, however. Washington increasingly has turned war into a matter of choice, just another foreign-policy option.

But promiscuous war-making has created a dangerous slippery slope, demonstrated by the Bush administration's extraordinary willingness to consider war with Russia over Georgia. Next time good sense might not prevail, and the cost could be incalculable.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire* (Xulon). He also is a fellow at the American Conservative Defense Alliance

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The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center
1615 L Street, Suite 1250
Washington, DC 20036
www.nixoncenter.org