

# America's deepening inferiority complex begins to bite Russia

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As the US beats a path through a social, political and economic forest of epic proportions, is it mere coincidence that news stories on Russia are becoming more hostile than ever?

Strangely, the end of the Cold War did not significantly alter the Western media's perceptions of Russia. In fact, the collapse of communism seems to have forced the American media establishment to dish out the dirt on Russia with more gusto than ever before.

Perhaps the catastrophic demise of the Soviet Union, an invaluable enemy that turned America's limited attention span away from its myriad domestic problems, is largely responsible for American media remaining frozen in its Cold War time warp. Or maybe Americans have simply absorbed too many James Bond flicks, and read too many James Clancy spy novels, to view Russia in any other way than negatively.

Whatever the case may be, this predictable knee-jerk reaction to all things Russian betrays more about the American media mindset, not to mention the real social conditions on Main Street, U.S.A., than anything remotely connected to modern Russia.

"Big-mouth Biden" signals Russian free-for-all

In July, US Vice President Joe Biden, just days after his Commander-in-Speech's successful trip to Moscow, fired the starting pistol for the latest wave of anti-Russian rhetoric when he lamented that, "Russia has some very difficult decisions to make."

"They have a shrinking population base," Biden started. "They have a withering economy, they have a banking sector that is not likely to be able to withstand the next 15 years."

Biden's gratuitous tirade against Russia, besides betraying a disturbing level of disunity in America's foreign policy sector, was in many ways a paranoid's mirror reflection of the very problems now facing the United States. After all, the entire world is now slogging its way through an economic swamp of dinosaur proportions, and most countries have "difficult decisions" to make.

Besides the part about a "shrinking population base," which America would be confronting no less than Russia had the state of Mexico never existed, Biden described word-for-word the profound problems now eating away at the pedestal of the American superpower.

"The number of problem US banks rose to the highest level in 15 years between April and

June,” the BBC reported Thursday, adding that “81 US banks have now been forced to close this year.”

But the next line provides a real clue to Biden’s inexplicable Russian offensive: “The regulator (The Federal Deposit Insurance Company, or FDIC) said that due to the large number of failed banks, its deposit insurance fund – which safeguards up to \$250,000 (£154,000) per personal bank account – had fallen by 20% between April and June to \$10.4bn (£ 6.4bn).”

Given this truly ominous scenario for US banks in the very near future, what was the US Vice President thinking when he predicted calamity – 15 years down the road – for the Russian banking system?

Perhaps Biden thought that by rhetorically unloading the dirty dishes into Russia’s big sink, all of America’s pressing domestic duties would go down the drain? Unfortunately, it’s not quite that simple.

Or maybe Biden wants the world to forget that it was America’s “withering economy,” and not Russia’s, that was mostly responsible for bringing the entire planet to the precipice of economic meltdown. This fact requires more than a passing mention.

American apologists for the Crash of 2008 like to blame this latest economic seizure on the inherent “sophistication” of US financial models, which apparently proved too obscure for the simple minds of simple consumers to comprehend.

In other words, had the American consumer only read the fine print on all of those millions of mortgage loans, or consulted a financial guide or guru, he would have realized that his simple home mortgage was actually an “adjustable-rate mortgage.” He would then have understood that he would be forced – despite his ability to afford the mark up – into a higher mortgage bracket once his “adjustable-rate mortgage” magically reset itself.

“More than one in eight US mortgage borrowers was behind on their payments or facing foreclosure at the end of the second quarter,” the Financial Times reported last week, “as rising unemployment aggravated the housing crisis, the Mortgage Bankers Association said yesterday.”

These are the most ominous figures for US mortgages since the MBA began keeping records in 1972, which begs the question: when is America going to send its citizens away to a weekend Capitalist camp so they can learn the dirty inside secrets of the system?

Imagine the fallout if such a shameful, unethical thing had transpired in Russia: the western media machine would have been screaming about “corruption” and the lack of transparency and democratic credentials. But when the same wicked thing occurs in God’s Country, pompous economists blame it on the “sophistication” of the system, despite a level of corporate corruption and political collusion that leave one breathless.

Meanwhile, scrappy Americans continue to hold out hope that with a little more tinkering with the Anglo-Saxon brand of laissez-faire Capitalism, give or take a few injected trillion of dollars courtesy of the untamed Fed, everything will be back to business as usual.

In fact, Americans are so confident about their future prospects that they can even refuse

national health care - in the middle of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression - at the very same time they happily prop up dying US banks and corporations with their own tax dollars. And then they can actually criticize a national healthcare plan as "socialist"! Hello? Yes, the lights are on in America, but is anybody home?

In hindsight, Biden's Russian broadside was meant to underline that Obama's trip to Moscow, which focused on nuclear disarmament and the balance of power, should not be misconstrued as the United States bowing down to its former Cold War nemesis. Rather, Biden's bizarre comments were designed to suggest that it was actually Russia that was looking for cheap handouts due to its "perilous" economic situation. Hillary Clinton's attempts at appeasement the next day ("We view Russia as a great superpower," she told reporters) only served to magnify Biden's ridiculous assertions.

The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming!

"Russians," according to Richard Pipes, writing in the delightfully objective Wall Street Journal (*Pride and Power*, August 22-23, 2009), "miss the status of their country as a force to be reckoned with: a country to be respected and feared." But since they are powerless to stop the US Juggernaut from steamrolling the planet, the only thing left for Russia to do, Pipes believes, is to play the naughty spoiler to all of America's benevolent plans.

"Under present conditions," writes Pipes, "the easiest way for them (Russians) to achieve this objective (superpower status) is to say "no" to the one undeniable superpower, the United States."

In this latest rip at Russia, Pipes argues that this intrinsically Russian craving for superpower status accounts for more than one Russian tantrum, including "their outrage at America's proposal to install rocket defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic."

So in Mr. Pipes's academically contrived vision of the Motherland, most Russians these days are huddled in their gloomy kitchens, sipping bitter tea while conspiring how to deliver an empire back to the glorious Motherland. This one journalist has sat in a lot of Russian kitchens, but "restoring empire" is a subject that has never once come up in conversation. The only talk of "expansion" seems to involve one's private dacha in the suburbs.

According to Pipes's pipedream, Russia's fixation on returning to its "rightful place in the world," is the root cause for Russia "misbehaving" and derailing all of America's grandiose plans, the majority of which (Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan) have an awful tendency for backfiring. In other words, when Russia questions the need for a missile defense system, for example, in its geopolitical backyard, it is acting aggressively and even nationalistically.

In these days of economic fire and brimstone, even photos of Putin's pectorals prompt fears of a resurgent Russia

One manifestation of Russia's yearning for superpower status, according to the rationale of the Financial Times, is Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's habit of going bare-chested astride horses for the benefit of the paparazzi.

"Mr. Putin's apparent compulsion for flaunting his torso," the FT hypothesized, "offers an unfortunate metaphor for Russia itself: a great, but waning power deluding itself that a show of muscle is the way to cling on to past glory."

Yes, that's right; Putin enjoying a shirtless day on the range in Siberia somehow demonstrates Russia's innate desire to conquer the world.

But what about Barack Obama and Nicolas Sarkozy, who were also caught casually displaying their pecs? Are these leaders any less power-hungry than Vladimir Putin since they, in a moment of machismo, and despite a little airbrushing, also presented their pectorals on the world stage? And let's not even attempt to psychoanalyze Italy's Silvio Berlusconi's latter-middle-aged machismo.

The Empire bites itself

Just 5 years ago, American academia could not resist gushing about the rise of "American empire" from every pulpit. Max Boot, a military historian, kicked around "a case for American empire," while neoconservative author Charles Krauthammer crowed in the run-up to the war in Iraq that "People are now coming out of the closet on the word empire. The fact is no country has been as dominant culturally, economically, technologically and militarily in the history of the world since the Roman Empire," he said in one of his more spookier unilateral moments.

Today, as America continues to struggle with the grim realities of a two-front war (Iraq and Afghanistan) these individuals are now licking their scholarly wounds, thumbing historical indexes for more relevant words besides "empire," including "overstretch" and "delusions of grandeur."

Presently, news out of Afghanistan and Iraq has been slowly disappearing from the front pages. When stories from the war front stop appearing in the newspapers, this can mean only one thing: things at the front are going badly. After all, no nation hides its military successes from its people.

Today, when the limits of unilateral power have once again been proven, American writers are taking a more sober look at the present realities. Several humbling things are already predictable: China, for example, Asia's great transformer, will surpass the United States in productivity in the next five years, possibly sooner; The cost of fighting wars on two fronts – in Afghanistan and Iraq – will eventually become unsustainable, if not unwinnable; Without a new revolutionary invention, on par with the automobile or computer, the future of the American economy will remain on very shaky ground. Meanwhile, unless America starts to invest much more in domestic issues (healthcare, infrastructure, and education) its overall economic standing in the world will continue to suffer.

But perhaps it is the unpredictable things that worry the US the most. American politics is witnessing a level of partisanship not seen since the Vietnam War. Town hall meetings have exposed the ugly head of a dual-party system that throws voters into the ring against itself. No outlet for real change is available as the corporate-owned media colossus refuses to acknowledge the popularity of truly radical-thinking contenders (think Ron Paul, for example, or Dennis Kucinich, two presidential "pretenders" who attracted enough public support except where it mattered most – in the newspapers and over the airwaves).

America believes that by characterizing Russia as a menacing bogeyman at every opportunity, this will deflect the full impact of its worrisome domestic situation. Negative reporting on other countries is certainly not a new strategy. However, this trick can only

work for so long before the true source of a nation's malaise is rightly revealed. And at this point the United States will be forced to confront its domestic demons – unilaterally.

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