

IDEAS & VOICES

U.S.-Russia relations, Ukraine and the Miami Valley

U.S.-Russia relations are at a low point. In recent years Russia has meddled in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, placed a bounty on American soldiers in Afghanistan, and launched a massive SolarWinds cyberattack against U.S. government agencies and businesses. Russia recently withdrew its ambassador to the U.S. after President Biden called Putin a “killer.” And the Biden administration has been more willing than its predecessor to call out Russia for its democratic and human rights shortcomings, including the imprisonment of the Russian opposition leader, Alexei Navalny. The U.S. just announced tough new sanctions against Russia for malign activities and expelled 10 Russian diplomats stationed in the U.S.



Jaro Bilocerkowycz
Guest Columnist

Russia can be expected to retaliate. And now there’s a potential international crisis looming between Russia and Ukraine that could pose a major test for the Biden administration and for Ukraine. Russia has engaged in a major buildup of a total of 80,000 military troops, tanks and artillery on two fronts, Ukraine’s eastern border and in occupied Crimea. The conflict between Ukraine and Russia has been ongoing since 2014 despite ceasefires and efforts at resolving the conflict. Russia has been funding, arming and commanding separatists in the Donbas area of eastern Ukraine. Russian officials and media have recently put out false and inflammatory statements about “threats” from Ukraine to civilians under separatist control that would be a pretext for potential Russian military intervention. The U.S. and Ukraine

are strategic partners. The U.S. has provided Ukraine with economic, political and military assistance versus an aggressive Russia and strongly supports Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity. Will the U.S. and the West provide substantial support for a strategic ally as Putin flexes Russia’s military muscle and threatens a neighbor? U.S. and European officials have voiced strong concern about escalating tensions and Russia’s intentions. The U.S. planned to send two naval destroyers to the Black Sea area as a show of political support for Ukraine and to monitor developments but canceled that deployment to de-escalate tensions. Why the escalation in tensions now? From a domestic perspective, Putin wants to generate an international crisis to deflect public attention from the controversial imprisonment of Alexei Navalny,

whose health is deteriorating, and from economic dissatisfaction. In addition, he hopes a military action or diplomatic victory might generate nationalist support to fortify his popularity and that of the ruling party ahead of parliamentary elections this September. Putin also wants to intimidate Ukraine and weaken its young president Volodymyr Zelensky to gain political concessions. Furthermore, Putin seems to be testing the resolve of the U.S. and Europe in supporting democratic Ukraine. The Biden administration and Ukraine must try to decipher Putin’s endgame. Is Russia preparing a further land-grab in eastern Ukraine or in Ukraine’s south adjacent to Crimea to obtain valuable water resources? That is possible but would be risky and lead to major sanctions against Russia and the loss of Russian soldiers, but the loss of territory would significantly

damage Ukraine. Russia’s intentions might be to place thousands of Russian troops in eastern Ukraine as “peacekeepers” to fortify its hold on those separatist-held areas and to increase pressure on Ukraine for political concessions. Since this second scenario would be less bad than the first, Putin might believe Ukraine and the West would grudgingly have to accept it with Russia the victor and Ukraine, the U.S. and Europe the losers and with fewer costs and less international backlash for Russia than an outright land-grab. A third possibility would be to simply hold provocative military exercises without either a land-grab or insertion of “peacekeepers” as a test-run, to gauge others’ political and military reactions, and to create a false sense of security for any future Russian military buildup along Ukraine’s borders. Russia’s actions in

Ukraine could further plummet U.S.-Russian relations to a new Cold War level and create rising tensions in Europe. This could have a major impact on the Dayton area’s largest employer, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and affect regional priorities and budgets, troop deployments, air surveillance, intelligence gathering, and enhanced coordination with allies. President Biden called Putin to discuss the Ukraine situation and other issues and suggested holding a summit in a third country to discuss U.S.-Russian relations. Such a meeting could deescalate rising tensions if Putin agrees to meet and holds off on threats to Ukraine. While we are focused on the pandemic, economic recovery, and racial justice, international issues remain important and impact us.

The Biden administration and Ukraine must try to decipher Putin’s endgame.

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FROM THE LEFT JACK OHMAN



FROM THE RIGHT DANA SUMMERS



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BALANCED VIEWS

FROM THE LEFT

‘A riot is the language of the unheard;’ it’s time to listen



Leonard Pitts Jr.

“The anguish we are suffering cannot translate into violence.” So said Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey last week in the wake of yet another police killing of yet another unarmed African-American man. The sentiment was altogether fitting and proper, especially given that his city was the epicenter of a national uprising last year after one of its police officers – Derek Chauvin, now on trial – killed a handcuffed, unarmed and unresisting black man named George Floyd by pushing a knee into his neck for nine and a half minutes. That captured-on-video killing stunned the world by its nonchalant cruelty, igniting both vigorous protests and spasms of violence – fed-up people, opportunistic leeches and even far-right provocateurs all meeting in the streets to make war. The nation endured long nights of rioting: the shattering of glass, the wailing of sirens, the looting of merchandise, the burning of businesses. Which allowed conservative observers with exactly zero empathy for Floyd and the terrible normalcy his death represented to change the subject, freed them from even pretending to ponder why

police find it so difficult to take Black people into custody without fatality. Instead, they shifted to a narrative of senseless people on a senseless rampage. “That’s always the problem with a little violence,” mused Martin Luther King, after what turned out to be his last march ended with a mob of young interlopers rioting along Beale Street in Memphis. Beyond its moral wrongness, King felt that as a practical matter, violence has a way of turning attention from the issues at hand and swinging the spotlight to itself. So certainly, the mayor is right. Anguish cannot be allowed to translate into violence. But neither can it translate into silence. One of the latest victims is 20-year-old Daunte Wright, stopped by police in Brooklyn Center just north of Minneapolis for driving with expired tags. He tried to flee, likely motivated by a quite sensible fear of police. Officer Kim Potter shot him once in the chest. She said she meant to use her Taser. And Lord, what are we supposed to do with that information? Say “Oops” and move on? At least three Black men – Oscar Grant and Eric Harris are the other two – have died in recent years from that “mistake” alone. If it has happened to any white people, it has escaped notice. Which is rather the point. These police “mistakes,” not to mention mis-

calculations, fatal assumptions and acts of non-chalant cruelty, happen with disproportionate frequency to African-American people and go routinely unpunished when they do. And for all the hue and cry they raise if a Walmart is torched, conservative observers seem never to notice or care. But this is rioting, too: the shattering of lives, the wailing of mothers, the looting of families, and the burning of potential, of everything that man or woman could have been. Again and again and again and again and again. And again. “The anguish we are suffering cannot translate into violence.” And certainly, no one wants that to happen. Yet, the possibility is ever present in Minneapolis, in Memphis, in Miami, in America, until we decide that Black lives do, indeed, matter. As King, whose hatred of violence was visceral, put it, “A riot is the language of the unheard.” So maybe it’s time to listen. If you don’t want anguish translating into violence, translate it into change.

Leonard Pitts Jr. writes for the Miami Herald.

FROM THE RIGHT

You’ll find misunderstanding of patriotism on both sides



George F. Will

The philosopher’s task is to facilitate clear thinking by making clarifying distinctions. People are not always grateful for this service, as Socrates discovered. The political philosopher’s task is to clarify contested concepts, such as patriotism. Regarding this, Steven B. Smith has drawn intelligent distinctions that might have some on the right and left competing for the pleasure of serving him a cup of hemlock. Patriotism is a species of loyalty and a form of love. In “Reclaiming Patriotism in an Age of Extremes,” Smith, a Yale philosopher, argues that many on the right profess to love the United States but misunderstand – or, worse, reject – the essence of what makes this creedal nation distinctive. And, Smith says, the patriotism that many on the left profess – on those occasions when they warily, gingerly embrace the idea – is a cold, watery affection for an abstraction. It is loyalty

to a hypothetical United States that might be worthy of their love-as-loyalty. Some on the right mistake their compound of grievances and resentments for patriotism. This mentality – separating “real” or “true” Americans from the rest – is akin to the ethno-nationalism that festers in Europe. It also is a sibling of the left’s identity politics of group memberships: In the right’s identity politics, the nation is the only group that matters. Patriotism understood as ethnic or racial solidarity disappears into truculent nationalism. “Like any virtue,” Smith writes, “loyalty has its pathologies.” Of which, ethno-nationalism is one. If patriotism is loyalty and a form of love, then a so-called patriotism that is not an expression of happiness – if it is not professed cheerfully – is a faux patriotism. Today, for many on the right, patriotism is a grim tabulation of regrets about things lost, and animosity toward those who supposedly caused the losses. What some on the left call patriotism is often an agenda-cum-indictment, a determination to make the United States less awful than they say it has been, and is. “For progressives,” Smith writes, “patriotism is not so much loyalty to an already established nation, but an aspiration to a country still to be accomplished.” And: “Progressivism has become less concerned with improving on the past than with erasing it.” Smith is being delicate.

Because applause is often the echo of a platitude, people are forever applauding the notion that “dissent is the highest form of patriotism,” partly because they think Thomas Jefferson said it, although there is no evidence he did. Of course, dissent can be patriotic. But a constant curdled dissent, in the form of disdain for the nation’s past that produced its present, is incompatible with patriotism. Patriotism, too, is a disposition – a “peculiarly conservative” one. It is “akin to gratitude” and “rooted in a rudimentary, even primordial love of one’s own: the customs, habits, manners, and traditions that make us who and what we are.” Patriotism suggests “an extended family,” which we love because it has “nurtured and sustained us through good times and bad.” “Patriotism,” Smith argues, “is a learned disposition. It is not indoctrination into an ideology, but a component of an educated mind.” Hence it is bad citizenship to teach American history as a litany of indictments. Although he thinks patriotism “must be taught,” he also says “it is an ethos, a shared habit,” something “felt,” what Abraham Lincoln called “the mystic chords of memory.” Smith’s book will help prevent patriotism from fading to something only dimly remembered.

George F. Will writes for The Washington Post.

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