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SNAPSHOT

Offensive Charm

Why Vladimir Putin Tried -- and Failed -- to Woo the U.S. Public

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The great foreign policy intellectual George Kennan would probably not have admitted feeling [nauseous](#) [1] after reading Russian President Vladimir Putin's *New York Times* [op-ed](#) [2] on Syria, but he certainly would have understood Democratic New Jersey Senator Bob Menendez's dismay. In his influential survey of American diplomatic history, Kennan famously lamented that U.S. foreign policy has always "felt itself beholden to short-term trends of public opinion in the country and from what we might call the erratic and subjective nature of public reaction to foreign policy questions." Kennan understood that the United States' commitment to democracy meant that the political system would always be vulnerable to opinions from self-serving and non-expert groups -- including international actors with an interest in the activities of the White House.

But if there is a long history of outside leaders intervening in U.S. foreign policy debates, there is also a long history of them doing so poorly, the latest example being Putin's [op-ed](#). Although it is natural that the U.S. political elites would bristle at being lectured to in public, they can rest assured that Putin, like his many foreign predecessors, is unlikely to have won over many American hearts or minds. It is no accident that such efforts to influence public opinion usually end up failing.

The first instance occurred in the early years after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution. In 1793, the French revolutionary government appointed Edmond-Charles Genêt as its minister to the United States. Despite President George Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality in the European wars of the period, Genêt worked against the U.S. government's official policy. He personally commissioned private American citizens to harass British ships and seize

their contents for use by French allies. He also appealed to sympathizers in the United States, including Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, to ally formally with the French revolutionary regime against Great Britain. When Washington rebuffed him, Genêt took his case to the American people through newspapers, speeches, and other efforts at what we would today call public diplomacy.

Genêt had a wide following across the eastern seaboard, and he had many sympathetic listeners. But Washington's calls for neutrality, rather than alliance with France or Great Britain, remained more popular. If anything, Genêt's activities reinforced fears that U.S. independence would be short-lived if the new government allowed foreign figures, even those who shared many of the nation's founding ideals, to shape foreign policy. Jefferson demanded Genêt's recall, and in June of 1794, Congress passed a strong neutrality bill, reinforcing Washington's proclamation of the year before. In a pattern that would recur for the next two centuries, Genêt's efforts to manipulate domestic opinion in the United States triggered a backlash.

Genêt's failure did not dissuade countless foreign officials after him from attempting to shift American policy through appeals to a potentially sympathetic public. In the twentieth century, Soviet leaders believed that they could convince the United States' "oppressed working masses" to reject the firm anticommunism of the "ruling class." Historians have uncovered evidence that, in the decades between the two world wars, Moscow used the American Communist Party and its sympathizers to advocate for U.S. recognition of the Soviet Union, increased aid for the regime, avoidance of war when Joseph Stalin signed his infamous nonaggression pact with Adolf Hitler in 1939, and a reversal when the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941. The historical record reveals that Soviet sympathizers in the United States shared valuable information with Moscow (especially regarding atomic weapons), but there is little evidence that Soviet efforts to sway American society shifted policy in a substantive way.

U.S. President Harry Truman adopted a firm policy of containing Soviet influence after the World War II. The evidence of Moscow's interference in American politics reinforced the strength and popularity of this strategy within the United States. Kennan was one of many officials who reacted strongly against Moscow's efforts to manipulate American democracy. He initially counseled for containment of the Soviet Union in his highly influential February 1946 "Long Telegram" from Moscow. In July 1947, he published a [public version](#) [3] of his advice in *Foreign Affairs*, with the purpose of increasing U.S. resolve to resist Soviet interventions at home and abroad.

During the decade after the Grand Alliance of World War II, Moscow's image in the United States rapidly deteriorated. Despite repeated failures in their public diplomacy, Soviet leaders remained convinced that there existed a core of "working-class opinion" in the United States they could turn to their advantage. In the fall of 1959, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev launched a new effort as part of a "goodwill" tour of the United States that year that included a famous visit to the "heartland" of American corn farming in Coon Rapids, Iowa.

At the same time, Khrushchev published an article in *Foreign Affairs* titled "[On Peaceful Coexistence](#) [4]." The Soviet leader asserted that the Soviet Union was a peace-loving society that did not seek war with the United States. Rather, he argued, Washington and Moscow must refrain from conflict and allow people in various societies, especially in Africa and Southeast Asia, which were just emerging from colonial rule, to choose their own forms of

government. Khrushchev criticized U.S. leaders for aggressive efforts to reverse communist advances in Central Europe, Cuba, Vietnam, and other areas: “Real facts of life in the last ten years have shown convincingly that the policy of ‘rolling back’ Communism can only poison the international atmosphere, heighten the tension between states and work in favor of the Cold War. Neither its inspirers nor those who conduct it can turn back the course of history and restore capitalism in the socialist countries.”

Khrushchev’s punch line was a call, repeated throughout his article, for “non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.” He blamed U.S. intervention in foreign societies for creating conflict and, in contrast, depicted the Soviet Union as modest and noninterventionist in its foreign policies. The publication of Khrushchev’s article in a prominent journal of American opinion made this claim particularly ironic.

The Soviet leader’s words attracted wide attention in the United States and even some sympathy from critics of American policy. The 1960 U.S. presidential election, however, proved that, if anything, Khrushchev’s “peace offensive” inspired distrust among Americans. Both candidates, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, called for a more forceful foreign policy to turn back communist advances. American voters perceived Khrushchev as an aggressor, and they feared that new Soviet missile capabilities would make Moscow more threatening. Both presidential candidates justified targeted interventions abroad to protect U.S. interests. The expansion of American military, economic, and cultural activities in Cuba, South Vietnam, the Congo, Indonesia, and other areas during the early 1960s reflected a heightened urgency about Soviet advances -- precisely the opposite policy Khrushchev advocated in his *Foreign Affairs* article. As in the case of Genêt more than 150 years earlier, Americans detected treachery and manipulation in the idealistic language of a foreign leader.

Putin is a product of the Cold War, and his *New York Times* op-ed echoes a similar strategy and message as Khrushchev’s article more than 50 years ago. Putin’s punch line is also a defense of noninterference in foreign societies, even those that use chemical weapons on their own people. Putin depicts Russia as a defender of the United Nations and international law, and he gloats about how Americans have suffered from their misguided interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries. The Russian president’s words attracted wide attention for these comments, especially his attack on American hopes to change the world: “It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation.”

According to public opinion polls, U.S. readers sympathize with Putin’s arguments against military strikes in Syria. Many Americans also display deep doubt about any special role their country can play to improve the world. Despite these points of possible agreement, it appears most readers recognize that the author of the *New York Times* op-ed is a foreign leader whose actions contradict most of his claims and who has strong interests in diminishing American influence abroad.

Echoing their predecessors’ experience with Genêt, Americans will interpret Putin’s domestic intervention as an interesting revelation about his motivations and aims but not as particularly relevant to the ultimate determination of American policy. Although U.S. public opinion has a tendency to simplify policy debates, as Kennan lamented, Americans are sophisticated enough to be conscious of their sources. Foreign leaders do not naturally earn the

public's trust; if anything, the historical record shows that the public presumption is against outsiders' claims and advice. This is especially true for countries with which the United States has long and volatile relations, such as France and Russia. For all the openness of American public debate, U.S. foreign policy has always been defined by individuals residing within its borders. American foreign policy is, above all, hypernationalist, and that is unlikely to change anytime soon.

Critics of Putin who are worried about his potential influence on American policy should regard his op-ed as an opportunity to turn the debate in their favor. His words are more likely to discredit the position he defends than they are to convince large numbers of Americans to follow his lead. Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.) has suggested that he might write a response to Putin in the Russian newspaper *Pravda*, but he would be better served to focus his efforts on using Putin's words against those who might agree with his counsel here in the United States. Although McCain is unlikely to convince a majority of Americans to support U.S. military intervention in Syria right now, future evidence of Syrian and Russian recalcitrance on the recent agreement for disarming Assad's chemical arsenal might make Putin's intervention more of a cause for action than restraint.

The ongoing debate surrounding U.S. policy in Syria shows that Kennan was correct about the importance of "short-term trends of public opinion." Those trends have always been defined by the words of prominent Americans, not those of foreign leaders.

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