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BY ANDREW BACEVICH

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Tanks for Nothing: Is Civilization Really at Stake in Ukraine?



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“To defend civilization, defeat Russia.” Writing in the unfailingly bellicose *Atlantic*, an American academic of my acquaintance recently issued that dramatic call to arms. And lest there be any confusion about the stakes involved, the image accompanying his essay depicted Russian President Vladimir Putin with a Hitler mustache and haircut.

Cast Putin as the latest manifestation of the *Führer* and the resurrection of Winston Churchill can't be far behind. And, lo, more than a few observers have already begun

depicting Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as the latest reincarnation of America's favorite British prime minister.

These days, it may be Western-supplied missiles downing "kamikaze drones" rather than Spitfires tangling with Messerschmitts over southern England, but the basic scenario remains intact. In the skies above Ukraine and on the battlefields below, the "finest hour" of 1940 is being reenacted. Best of all, we know how this story ends — or at least how it's supposed to end: with evil vanquished and freedom triumphant. Americans have long found comfort in such simplified narratives. Reducing history to a morality play washes away annoying complexities. Why bother to think when the answers are self-evident?

A Case of Whataboutism?

Not that donning the mantle of Churchill necessarily guarantees a happy outcome — or even continued U.S. support. Recall, for example, that during a visit to Saigon in May 1961, Vice President Lyndon Johnson infamously anointed South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem the "Churchill of Asia."

Alas, that exalted title didn't spare Diem from being overthrown and murdered in a CIA-facilitated coup slightly more than two years later. U.S. complicity in bumping off South Vietnam's stand-in for Churchill marked a critical turning point in the Vietnam War, transforming an annoyance into an out-and-out debacle. An appreciation for such ironies may help explain why Zelensky's preferred anti-Nazi isn't Winston Churchill but Charlie Chaplin.

All of that said, defending civilization is an honorable and necessary cause that deserves the support of every American. Where things get sticky is in deciding how to frame such an essential task. Put bluntly, who gets to choose what's both honorable and necessary? In the editorial offices of the *Atlantic* and similarly Russophobic quarters, the unacknowledged assumption is, of course, that *we* do, where "we" means the West and, above all, the United States.

Timothy Snyder, a self-described "historian of political atrocity" who teaches at Yale, subscribes to this proposition. He recently weighed in with 15 reasons "Why the World Needs Ukrainian Victory." Those 15 range widely indeed. A Ukrainian victory, Snyder asserts, will (#1) "defeat an ongoing genocidal project"; (#3) "end an era of empire"; and (#6) "weaken the prestige of tyrants." By teaching an object lesson to China, it will also (#9) "lift the threat of major war in Asia." For those worried about the climate crisis, defeating Russia will also (#14) "accelerate the shift from fossil fuels." My own #1 is Snyder's #13: a win for Ukraine will "guarantee food supplies and prevent future starvation."

Put simply, according to Snyder, a Ukrainian victory over Russia will have a redemptive impact on just about any imaginable subject, transforming the global order along with

humanity itself. Ukrainians, he writes, “have given us a chance to turn this century around.” Again, let me emphasize that what gives me pause is the “us.”

That Professor Snyder along with the editors of the *Atlantic* (and similarly pugnacious publications) should focus so intently on the unfolding events in Ukraine is understandable enough. After all, the war there *is* a horror. And while Vladimir Putin’s crimes may fall well short of Hitler’s — whatever his malign intent may have been, stalwart Ukrainian resistance has certainly taken genocide off the table — he is indeed a menace of the first order and his reckless aggression deserves to fail.

Whether Ukrainian bravery combined with advanced Western weaponry will, however, have more than a passing impact on world history strikes me as a dubious proposition. Granted, on that score, I may be in the minority. Along with causing immense suffering, Putin’s war has unleashed a tidal wave of hyperbole, with Professor Snyder’s 15 reasons but one example.

As someone who makes no pretense to being an “historian of political atrocity” — the most I can muster is to classify myself as a “student of American folly” — my guess is that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine will have about as much lasting impact as our own invasion of Iraq, its 20th anniversary now approaching.

Bold to the point of recklessness, George W. Bush and his associates set out to alter the course of history. By invading a distant land deemed critical for this country’s national security, they sought to inaugurate a new era of American global dominance (styled “liberation” for propaganda purposes). The results achieved, to put it mildly, were different than expected.

However grotesque, Putin’s ambitions in Ukraine seem almost modest by comparison. Through an invasion and war of choice (styled an anti-fascist crusade for propaganda purposes), he sought to reassert Russian dominance over a nation the Kremlin had long deemed essential to its security. The results achieved so far, we can safely say, have proven to be other than those he expected.

When the Russian president embarked on his war in 2022, he had no idea what he was getting into, any more than George W. Bush did in 2003. Admittedly, the two make odd bedfellows and one can easily imagine each taking offense at being compared to the other. Still, the comparison is unavoidable: In the present century, Putin and Bush have been *de facto* collaborators in perpetrating havoc.

Some might charge me with committing the sin of whataboutism, pointing an accusing finger in one direction to excuse iniquity in another, but that’s hardly my intent. There’s no letting Putin off the hook: his actions have been those of a vile criminal.

Civilization at Risk?

But if Putin is a criminal, how then are we to judge those who conceived of, sold, launched, and thoroughly botched the Iraq War? With the passing of 20 years, has some

statute of limitations kicked in to drain that conflict of relevance? My own sense is that the national security establishment is now strongly inclined to pretend that the Iraq War (and the Afghanistan War as well) never happened. Such an exercise in selective memory helps validate the insistence that Ukraine has once more conferred on the United States the primary responsibility for defending “civilization.” That no one else can assume that role is simply taken for granted in Washington.

Which brings us back to the nub of the issue: How is it that this particular conflict puts civilization itself at risk? Why should rescuing Ukraine take priority over rescuing Haiti or Sudan? Why should fears of genocide in Ukraine matter more than the ongoing genocide targeting the Rohingya in Myanmar? Why should supplying Ukraine with modern arms qualify as a national priority, while equipping El Paso, Texas, to deal with a flood of undocumented migrants figures as an afterthought? Why do Ukrainians killed by Russia generate headlines, while deaths attributable to Mexican drug cartels — 100,000 Americans from drug overdoses annually — are treated as mere statistics?

Of the various possible answers to such questions, three stand out and merit reflection.

The first is that “civilization,” as the term is commonly employed in American political discourse, doesn’t encompass places like Haiti or Sudan. Civilization derives from Europe and remains centered in Europe. Civilization implies Western culture and values. So, at least, Americans — especially members of our elite — have been conditioned to believe. And even in an age that celebrates diversity, that belief persists, however subliminally.

What makes Russian aggression so heinous, therefore, is that it victimizes Europeans, whose lives are deemed to possess greater value than the lives of those who reside in implicitly less important regions of the world. That there is a racist dimension to such a valuation goes without saying, however much U.S. officials may deny that fact. Bluntly, the lives of white Ukrainians matter more than the lives of the non-whites who populate Africa, Asia, or Latin America.

The second answer is that casting the Ukraine War as a struggle to defend civilization creates a perfect opportunity for the United States to reclaim its place at the forefront of that very civilization. After years wasted wandering in the desert, the United States can now ostensibly return to its true calling.

President Zelensky’s astutely crafted address to Congress emphasized that return. By comparing his own troops to the G.I.s who fought in the Battle of the Bulge and quoting President Franklin Roosevelt on the inevitability of “absolute victory,” it was as if Winston Churchill himself had indeed reappeared in the Capitol to enlist Americans in the cause of righteousness.

Needless to say, Zelensky skipped past the distinctly un-Churchillian lapse in that tradition signified by the presidency of Donald Trump. Nor did he mention his own flirtation with Trump, which included assurances that “you are a great teacher for us.”

“America is back,” Joe Biden declared on multiple occasions during the first weeks of his presidency, and the Ukrainian president has been only too happy to repeatedly validate that claim as long as the flow of arms and munitions to sustain his forces continues. This country’s disastrous post-9/11 wars may have raised doubts about whether the United States had kept its proper place on the right side of history. With Zelensky signaling his approval, however, Washington’s participation in a proxy war — our treasure, someone else’s blood — seems to have quieted those doubts.

One final factor may contribute to this eagerness to see civilization itself under deadly siege in Ukraine. Demonizing Russia provides a convenient excuse for postponing or avoiding altogether a critical reckoning with the present American version of that civilization. Classifying Russia as a de facto enemy of the civilized world has effectively diminished the urgency of examining our own culture and values.

Think of it as an inverse conception of whataboutism. Shocking Russian brutality and callous disregard for Ukrainian lives divert attention from similar qualities not exactly uncommon on our very own streets.

As I began work on this essay, the Biden administration had just announced its decision to provide Ukraine with a handful of this country’s most advanced M-1 Abrams tanks. Hailed in some quarters as a “game changer,” the arrival of relatively small numbers of those tanks months or more from now is unlikely to make a decisive difference on the battlefield.

Yet the decision has had this immediate effect: It affirms the U.S. commitment to prolonging the Ukraine War. And when credit earned for sending tanks is exhausted, the editors of the *Atlantic* backed by professors from Yale will undoubtedly press for F-16 fighter jets and long-range rockets President Zelensky is already requesting.

Consider all of this, then, a signature of America in our time. Under the guise of turning the century around, we underwrite violence in faraway lands and thereby dodge the actual challenges of changing our own culture. Unfortunately, when it comes to rehabilitating our own democracy, all the Abrams tanks in the world won’t save us.

This column is distributed by [TomDispatch](#).

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Andrew Bacevich is the author of [America’s War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History](#), which has just been published by Random House.