

# The Atlantic

GLOBAL

## The American Education of Vladimir Putin

How the Russian leader came to oppose a country he knows little about



Win McNamee/Reuters

**FIONA HILL AND CLIFFORD G. GADDY**  
FEB 16, 2015

*"The problem you Americans have in dealing with us is that you think you understand us, but you don't. You look at the Chinese and you think: 'They're not like us.' You look at us Russians, and you think, 'They're like us.' But you're wrong. We are not like you."*

Over the past few years, top-ranking Russians have repeatedly delivered versions of the admonition above to American interlocutors. We've been told that it comes originally from Vladimir Putin. That makes sense. Putin is a former intelligence officer. And what the warning expresses, with typically Putin-esque bluntness and political incorrectness, is a [maxim](#) shared by U.S. intelligence officers: Beware of seeing false mirror images. Do not assume your adversary will think and act the same way you would in similar circumstances. You will likely misread him if you do.

Despite a [new ceasefire](#), Russia and the West remain at risk of uncontrolled escalation over Ukraine, and in such situations little can be more dangerous than misreading your adversary. So Putin is right: Washington shouldn't "mirror-image" him, and U.S. leaders shouldn't assume that he will interpret events and words as they might. But one neglected question is that of how Putin interprets the United States. Has he followed his own advice—or does he assume Americans, including President Obama, will act and react as he would? Does he even care about how Americans think, what their motives and values are, how their system works? What does Vladimir Putin actually know about the U.S. and about Americans?

As it turns out, very little.

\* \* \*

Because of his KGB history, Vladimir Putin is typically accused in U.S. media of harboring an anti-American, Cold War view of the United States, and of blaming the United States for bringing down the Soviet Union. But there is little evidence of any anti-American views in the early phases of Putin's public life. As deputy mayor of St. Petersburg in the 1990s, he did not accuse the United States of destroying the Soviet Union. Instead he publicly laid blame for the collapse of the U.S.S.R. on the miscalculations of Soviet leaders and their mishandling of reforms in the 1980s. His more negative views of

the United States, and its perceived threat to Russia, seem to have hardened later in the 2000s, over the course of his interactions and relationships with two American presidents: George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

#### RELATED STORY

---



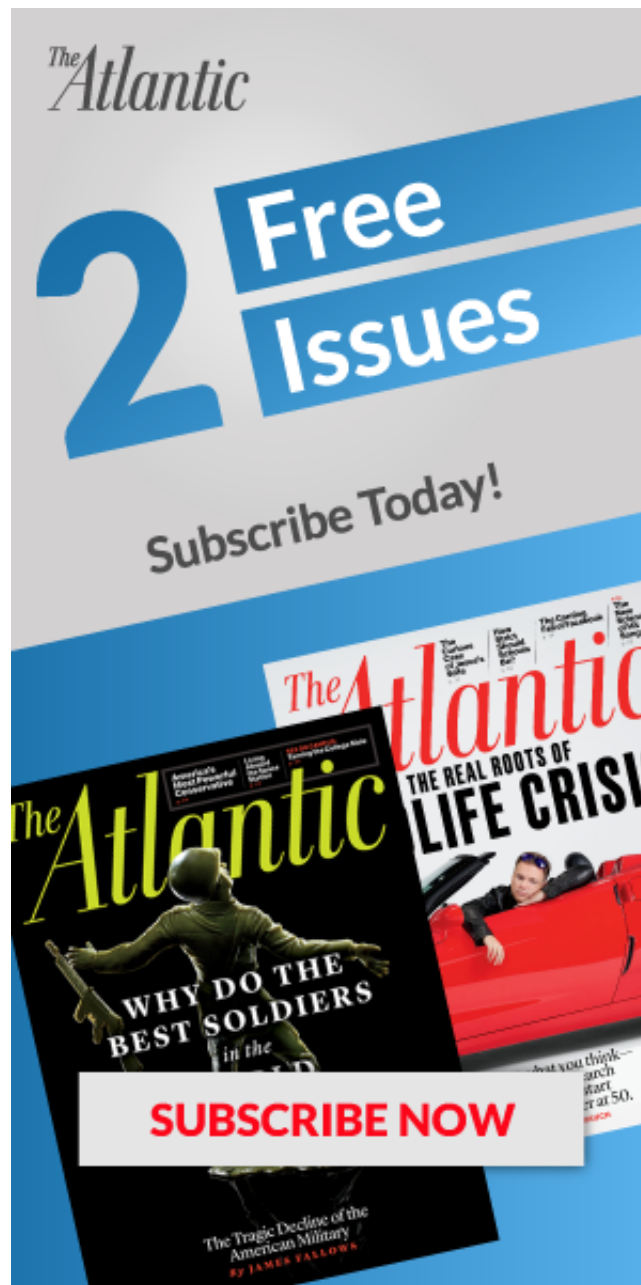
#### Vladimir Putin, Action Man

---

There is no reliable record of Putin's interactions with Americans or his thoughts on the United States during key phases of his life: his youth in Leningrad, his KGB service, his period in the St. Petersburg mayor's office, and his pre-presidential years in Moscow. When Putin went to Leningrad State University in the early 1970s, only a small number of American exchange students were there. But Putin did not study English, and he would have had limited opportunity to socialize with the American students outside the university. During his early KGB service in Leningrad in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the United States was filtered through the world of counterespionage and global developments of the time; Americans seemed dangerous and unpredictable.

---

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT



The early 1980s were years of heightened Cold War confrontation. After a period of *détente*, the United States had again become a clear and present danger for the Soviet Union. Based on their analysis of U.S. defense budgets, global U.S. military exercises, American and NATO air probes near sensitive Soviet borders, statements by top White House and Pentagon officials, and increased operations by the CIA in Afghanistan and elsewhere, the Kremlin leadership was thoroughly convinced that the United States posed a real military threat.

March 1983 brought a full-scale war scare, just after U.S. President Ronald Reagan announced the proposed development of a missile-defense system to shield the United States from a Soviet nuclear strike. Soviet leader Yuri Andropov lashed out against those plans and raised the specter of a nuclear holocaust. On March 8, 1983, Reagan made his famous “Evil Empire” speech about the dangers posed to the United States and its way of life by the Soviet Union. In September 1983, the situation deteriorated further when Soviet warplanes intercepted and shot down a civilian South Korean Airlines plane, KAL 007, in the mistaken belief that it was a U.S. spy plane.

In the Soviet Union, top leaders terrified themselves and their population with memories of World War II, and specifically of Adolf Hitler’s surprise 1941 attack on the U.S.S.R. As Benjamin Fischer, an analyst and scholar at the CIA’s Center for the Study of Intelligence, noted: “For decades after the war, Soviet leaders seemed obsessed with the lessons of 1941, which were as much visceral as intellectual in Soviet thinking about war and peace.”

Andropov and his colleagues put the KGB on full alert in the early 1980s in response to the lessons they had learned from the Soviet intelligence failures of World War II. It was around that time that Putin entered the KGB Red Banner Institute in Moscow, where Soviet paranoia about the United States and fears of a nuclear war undoubtedly framed the tone and content of his instruction.

\* \* \*

Putin was posted in Dresden, East Germany, by the time Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan began a process that would put the tensions and war scares of the early 1980s behind them. He was too low in the KGB rankings to have much interaction with any top-level espionage targets, which would have included Americans. Until he came back from Dresden in 1990 and began working for the mayor of St. Petersburg, Vladimir Putin may have

never met an American in any personal context.

By contrast, his position as St. Petersburg's deputy mayor in charge of external relations offered Putin many opportunities to interact with Americans, in a very different atmosphere from that of the 1980s. After 1991, the Soviet Union was gone, and Putin and the rest of the mayor's team were trying to figure out how to run the city and make its economy competitive again. American and other Western politicians, as part of a U.S. effort to forge a new relationship with the Russian Federation, openly courted Putin's boss Anatoly Sobchak, the first democratically elected mayor of St. Petersburg. Putin seemed to respond well to the overtures.

U.S. businesses that moved into St. Petersburg had to deal directly with Deputy Mayor Putin who, according to John Evans, the U.S. consul general in St. Petersburg at the time, was always helpful in resolving contract disputes between U.S. and Russian businesses. Within the city's U.S. and Western business community, Putin was seen as "pro-business." He gave no impression whatsoever of any anti-American or anti-Western views.



Putin in KGB uniform  
(Wikimedia)

The St. Petersburg connection also gave Putin an important entry point into

the United States. In 1992, Sobchak co-chaired a bilateral commission on St. Petersburg with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. It is not clear how much direct contact Putin and Kissinger had at that time. But Kissinger would become an important interlocutor for Putin when he became president later on. Putin has admitted that the source of his initial interest in Kissinger was the former secretary of state's early career in World War II military intelligence. As a renowned scholar with an academic career and numerous books to his name, Kissinger could provide a sounding board for ideas about geopolitics. He could interpret the United States and the West for Putin. And he could explain Vladimir Putin to other influential Americans. But beyond Kissinger, Putin has had few representative Americans to rely on for insights into how the U.S. political system works and how Americans and their leaders think.

The two key presidential aides in charge of overseeing critical aspects of relations between Moscow and Washington for most of the 2000s—Sergei Prikhodko and his deputy, Alexander Manzhosin—spoke English, but to our knowledge neither had any experience of living or working in the United States. Otherwise, Putin's "go-to guys" for the United States within the Russian government and the Kremlin have been Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister and former representative to the UN in New York, who speaks fluent English, and Yury Ushakov, a personal presidential advisor and former Russian ambassador to the United States. Putin's lack of fluency in English has limited his own ability to have direct contacts except through interpreters or others who can act as connectors and conduits. Nor has he shown any particular curiosity about America beyond its leaders and their actions.

\* \* \*

By 1994, the U.S.S.R.'s military alliance, the Warsaw Treaty Organization,



had collapsed along with the rest of the Soviet bloc, but NATO was still going strong, and Eastern European countries were knocking on its door seeking new security arrangements. Five years later, the issue of [NATO and NATO enlargement](#) came to play a significant role in Putin's professional life and his ascent to the presidency.

Putin was head of the Federal Security Service (FSB), the post-Soviet successor to the KGB, when the alliance went to war in response to Yugoslav military atrocities against ethnic Albanian civilians in Kosovo, which was still part of Yugoslavia. The intervention took place a mere two weeks after NATO had admitted Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. The United States did not secure the usual authority from the United Nations to intervene. NATO warplanes bombed Belgrade, and NATO forces, with American troops in the lead, then moved into Kosovo to secure the territory and roll back the Yugoslav military. As Putin put it in a speech 15 years later: "It was hard to believe, even seeing it with my own eyes, that at the end of the 20th century, one of Europe's capitals, Belgrade, was under missile attack for several weeks, and then came the real [military] intervention."

---

## **There's little evidence of anti-American views in the early phases of Putin's public life.**

---

NATO's Kosovo campaign was a turning point for Moscow and for Putin personally. Russian officials interpreted the intervention as a means of expanding NATO's influence in the Balkans, not as an effort to deal with a humanitarian crisis. They began to revise their previous conclusions about the prospects for cooperating with NATO as well as with the United States as the leader of the alliance. As Putin noted in a [March 2014 speech](#), the experience left him with a rather harsh view of Americans, who, he said, "prefer in their practical politics to be guided not by international law, but by



the law of force.” The Americans had, as they would on numerous occasions, “taken decisions behind our backs, presented us with accomplished facts.”

\* \* \*

In August 1999, Putin was appointed prime minister, and his immediate concern was Chechnya, where separatist violence was spilling over the border and into the rest of Russia. The considerable high-level Western attention to, and criticism of, the second outbreak of war in the republic stoked Russian fears of NATO or U.S. intervention in the conflict. In the United States, for example, Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor in the Carter administration, and retired general Alexander Haig, a former secretary of state in the Reagan administration who had also served in top positions in the U.S. military and in NATO, helped to set up an advocacy group to demand a diplomatic solution to the war and policies to protect civilians caught in the conflict. Given the Soviet leadership’s neuralgia about officials like Brzezinski and Haig in the 1970s and 1980s, this group was viewed with alarm in Moscow. Russian political figures saw the risk of the Americans and NATO intervening in Chechnya to protect civilians, just as they had intervened in Kosovo.

Putin’s response was to write an [op-ed](#) in *The New York Times* in November 1999, in an early foray into international PR. He explained that Moscow had launched its military campaign in Chechnya to respond to acts of terrorism. He praised the United States for its own strikes against terrorists, noting that “when a society’s core interests are besieged by violent elements, responsible leaders must respond” and calling for the “understanding of our friends abroad.” The general message was conciliatory. Putin clearly hoped that the constructive atmosphere that had framed his interactions with Americans in St. Petersburg could be restored in some way.

After September 11, he appeared convinced that Washington would come to

see things from Moscow's perspective and would recognize linkages between al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and terrorists in Chechnya. In a [press conference](#) in Brussels on October 2, 2001, Putin asserted that terrorists took advantage of "Western institutions and Western conceptions of human rights and the protection of the civilian population ... not in order to defend Western values and Western institutions, but rather ... in a struggle against them. Their final goal is annihilation." All states would have to clamp down politically at home, as well as improve military postures abroad, to deal with this problem. Based on Russia's experience in Afghanistan and Chechnya, Putin offered the United States concrete assistance in rooting out al-Qaeda.

If Putin and the Kremlin hoped to create an international anti-terrorist coalition with Washington modeled on the U.S.-Soviet World War II alliance against Germany—one that would give Russia an equal say with the United States—that hope went unfulfilled. As Georgetown professor and former U.S. government official Angela Stent has pointed out: "When countries form partnerships forged out of exigencies such as the 9/11 attacks, the shelf life for these alliances is usually short because they have a specific and limited focus." The U.S.-Soviet anti-Nazi alliance itself, she wrote, "began to fray as the victors disagreed about what would happen after Germany surrendered, and the Cold War began."

---

**"I feel that I'm personally to blame for what happened on 9/11. Yes, I spoke a great deal about that threat. Apparently, I didn't say enough."**

---

In the aftermath of 9/11, Putin was mystified by the actions of his U.S. counterparts. In the absence of countervailing information, Putin initially saw American failure to respond to his warnings about the common threat of terrorism as a sign of dangerous incompetence. In a series of speeches just

after September 11, Putin said he “was astonished” at the Clinton administration’s lack of reaction to his warnings of a terrorist plot brewing in Afghanistan. “I feel that I personally am to blame for what happened,” he lamented. “Yes, I spoke a great deal about that threat. ... Apparently, I didn’t say enough. I didn’t find the words that could rouse people [in the U.S.] to the required system of defense.”

The 2003 U.S. intervention in Iraq convinced Putin that the United States was up to no good and looking for pretexts to intervene against hostile regimes to enhance its geopolitical position. Putin and his intelligence officials knew that Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein was bluffing about his possession of chemical and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD). After the invasion of Iraq, and the U.S. failure to find any WMD, a comment attributed to Putin was passed around European diplomatic circles: “Pity about the WMD. I would have found some.” In other words, the U.S. intelligence services and government were beyond incompetent—if you’re going to use a pretext, do your homework; make sure it’s a good one.

The opinion Putin and his security team seem to have formed over this period—that the United States was not just incompetent but dangerous, and intent on inflicting harm on Russia—was strikingly at odds with the conclusion in the United States that the collapse of Soviet communism meant the disappearance of the military threat from Moscow. As in the 1980s, U.S. officials had a hard time believing that Russia could genuinely see the United States as a threat. As a result, Washington made decisions that were consistently misinterpreted in Moscow—including a [second major NATO enlargement](#) in 2004.

\* \* \*

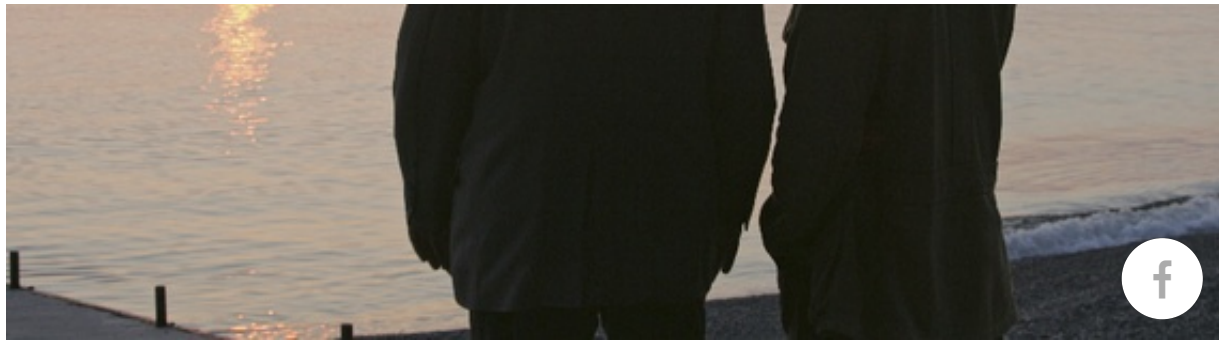
The color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 further darkened Putin’s view of U.S. activities. For Moscow, Georgia was a tiny

failed state, but Ukraine was a smaller version of Russia. In Putin's view the Orange Revolution demonstrations in Ukraine in 2004, and their scale, could only have been orchestrated from the outside. This was especially the case when the color revolutions became conceptually tied to the Bush administration's "Freedom Agenda" and its efforts to support the development of civil society and the conduct of free elections in Afghanistan and Iraq—two countries that the United States had invaded and occupied.

The color revolutions, Putin argued in his March 2014 speech, were not spontaneous. The West inflicted them on a whole array of countries and people. The West, Putin argued, tried to impose a set of "standards, which were in no way suitable for either the way of life, or the traditions, or the cultures of these peoples. As a result, instead of democracy and freedom—there was chaos and the outbreak of violence, a series of revolutions. The 'Arab Spring' was replaced by the 'Arab Winter.'"

Russia's 2008 war with Georgia marked the end of Putin's relationship with George W. Bush and his administration. The Obama administration came into office shortly afterward, intent on a "reset" that seemed to address Putin's main stated desire for Russia to be approached by the United States with pragmatism on issues of mutual interest and importance. But once again, Putin and the Kremlin took their policy cues from U.S. actions rather than words.





Putin and Bush watch the sun set in Sochi, in 2008. (RIA Novosti/Reuters)

U.S. offers of modernization partnerships to boost bilateral trade and help secure Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization were combined with bilateral presidential commissions for human rights and civil-society development. The repeal of Cold War-era restrictions on U.S. trade with Russia was accompanied by the introduction of a new raft of sanctions in the form of the Sergei Magnitsky Act, which targeted a list of Russian officials who had been complicit in the death of a crusading Russian lawyer.

Disagreements with the United States and NATO over interventions in the civil wars that erupted in Libya and then Syria in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings marred U.S. and Russian cooperation on negotiating with Iran over the future of its nuclear program. Putin was especially angered by the violent death of Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi at the hands of rebels who found him hiding in a drainage pipe during an attempt to flee Tripoli following NATO's intervention in Libya. In Putin's interpretation, the 2011-2012 Russian political protests were just part of this one long sequence of events, with the hand of the West barely concealed.

On September 11, 2013, on the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Putin returned to a public format that he had not used since 1999. He again wrote an [op-ed](#) in *The New York Times*, directed at the American public and calling for U.S. caution as it contemplated a military strike on Syria. The tone was anything but conciliatory. The prose was bold, not cautious. Putin observed: "It is alarming that military intervention in internal conflicts in foreign countries has become commonplace for the United States. Is it in

America's long-term interest? I doubt it. Millions around the world increasingly see America not as a model of democracy but as relying solely on brute force, cobbling coalitions together under the slogan 'you're either with us or against us.'"

With this op-ed, Putin effectively declared that his American education was complete.

By 2013, as the crisis in Ukraine began to unfold, Putin's view of America had become dark indeed. As he concluded in his March 2014 [speech](#): "Russia strived to engage in dialogue with our colleagues in the West. We constantly propose cooperation on every critical question, want to strengthen the level of trust, want our relations to be equal, open, and honest. But we have not seen reciprocal steps." Limited by a lack of direct contacts with the United States, and driven by his perception of the threat it posed, Putin believed that he had been rebuffed or deceived at every turn by the West.

---

*This post has been adapted from a new, expanded edition of [Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin](#).*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

---

**FIONA HILL** is the director of the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution.

---

**CLIFFORD G. GADDY** is a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program at the Brookings Institution.

---