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The American Image in Russia

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*Good bye, America, oh,
Where I've never been.*

...

*I've grown out
Of your battered jeans.
We've been taught so long
To adore your forbidden fruits.*

*Good bye, America, oh,
Where I'll never be.
Will I ever hear a song,
To remember forever?*

These words of the iconic 1985 hit by “Nautilus Pompilius,” a popular Russian rock group, became a hymn of the informal pro-Western movements of the *perestroika* period. At the same time, the attitude of the elder generation of the Soviet people toward the United States, deliberately or subconsciously, was driven by Nikita Khrushchev’s slogan “to catch up and outdo America!”

Russians young and old were projecting their future rather than comparing it to their imaginary vision of America that was formed mainly by old-fashioned American novels and Hollywood movies that flooded the Soviet Union on video cassettes in the late 1980s. Very few Russians visited the United States at that time, and even fewer seriously researched and understood life and politics in America.

With the end of the confrontation, Russia’s dismantlement of its Cold War machinery, and the great reduction in bilateral tensions, the image of the United States in Russian minds became a

function of their expectations for improvement of their living standards, on the one hand, and of Russia's international standing, on the other.

Unrealistic expectations of a new 'Marshall Plan for Russia' ("America had spent billions of dollars in the Cold War, it would surely not spare on helping a friendly new Russia!") and of a strategic alliance with the United States predictably gave way to disenchantment and irritation. Internationally, despite the good personal relations between Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton, Russia was treated at best as a junior partner, and not good enough to join the North Atlantic Alliance – the Western Cold War construct that was enlarging and enclosing Russia.

Domestically, Russians were angered by the role of the Harvard economic advisers to the Kremlin who, they believed, influenced a robber-baron style of privatization of Russia's economic wealth that fabulously enriched a few and left masses in poverty. Another group of American experts – this time in public relations – helped Boris Yeltsin stay in power during the 1996 presidential race, which he had almost lost. That experience taught the Russian political class how to manipulate the mass media and elections.

Yet another blow to America's moral leadership of the democratic West was inflicted by a deafening silence from the White House in October 1993 when President Yeltsin violently suppressed his opposition, dispersing the parliament and setting the building afire with artillery shells.

The U.S.-led NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 put an end to the Russians' hopes of a mutually prosperous future with an American-led West. For the first time after the end of the Cold War, the two nations were on the brink of an armed conflict.

For a period of time after September 11, it appeared that the sincere sympathy from the Russians for the attacked people of America could develop into a new kind of relationship. The two nations managed to avoid a crisis over the U.S. abrogation of the 1972 ABM Treaty. More than that, Russia closed down two Soviet-era military bases in Cuba and Vietnam, supported the fight against al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and was steadily improving overall relations with the West.

But the Iraq adventure put an end to that rapprochement. Furthermore, support by Washington for the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine not only irritated Moscow but also added to Russian suspicions that the American government was encouraging leaders in the former Soviet Republics who conducted the most Russophobic policies, like Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia and Viktor Yushenko of Ukraine, rather than the critics of the authoritarian regime in the Kremlin. The August 2008 war in Georgia brought Russian-American relations and the American image in Russia to the lowest point since the post-Cold War. Similar to the events in April 1999, when NATO bombed Yugoslavia, in August 2008, even truly democratically-oriented Russians, who criticized authoritarian setbacks and democratic deficits at home, supported the Russian government's reaction to the Georgian armed violence against friendly people.

The aggregate result of public-opinion polls conducted by the independent Levada Center in Russia during the last two decades shows the evolution of Russian attitudes toward the United States:

What is your attitude toward the United States of America?¹

	May '90	Nov '91	Aug '92	Apr '93	Mar '95	Mar '97	Dec '98	Nov '99	Jul '00	Nov '01	Nov '02	Nov '03	Nov '04	Nov '05	Nov '06	Nov '07	Nov '08	Nov '09	Jan '10
Very good / good	73	80	73	71	65	72	67	54	69	68	61	59	66	63	56	54	31	54	54
Bad / very bad	7	6	7	7	13	18	23	31	23	22	29	33	29	30	32	35	55	28	31
No opinion	20	14	20	22	22	10	10	15	8	10	10	9	5	7	12	11	15	17	15

Despite the problems discussed above (and unlike in a considerable part of the ruling elite), there is no widespread anti-Americanism in Russian public opinion. Russians do not care about U.S. domestic policies and are concerned only about American involvement in Russia's historical neighboring states. Russians don't trust the politicians in Washington, D.C. any more than they do in Moscow.

Russians understand that their country is far less relevant to the United States than was the late Soviet Union, and are not surprised that America is less actively engaged with Russia. Still, they don't want America to exploit Russia's comparative weakness, as it has been doing during the twenty post-Soviet years.

By not doing further harm, the United States could improve its image and win back Russian friendly feelings. But to do so, America badly needs the advice of knowledgeable Russia scholars of the caliber of George Kennan.

Below is some practical policy advice for improving relations.

First, in February 2010, the U.S. Intelligence Community published its Annual Threat Assessment, which concluded that some Eurasian governments, including Russia, are now so intertwined with international organized crime groups that the two are almost synonymous—a situation called “state capture.” If American intelligence services really know who the corrupt Russian politicians are, as we suspect they do, Washington could greatly increase U.S. popularity among everyday Russians by publishing the criminals' names and the numbers of their Western bank accounts where they've stashed their ill-gotten gains. We will be happy to take it from there.

¹ <http://www.levada.ru/press/2010022602.html>

The second suggestion is as easy to offer as it is hard to follow: the United States should stop 'Americanizing' the world – and Russia in particular. That means that "political correctness" principles should govern the U.S. foreign policy and practice as much as it commands its domestic life. The U.S. has to acknowledge the right of other people to determine their own destinies, which may or may not be what Americans would choose.

Some two and a half centuries ago, Benjamin Franklin coined a motto which is still appropriate and applicable today: “Mind your own business.” At one or another period of history, Germany, Italy, France, Great Britain, Japan were all enemies of Russia. Today these countries enjoy a public perception of being fair partners of Russia rather than adversaries. It is hard to find anti-German or anti-French feelings in Russia – probably because they do 'mind their own business' and offer equal and mutually beneficial cooperation to Russians.

Third, the United States should apply its image concerns not to current generations of Russians, but mainly to the future ones, those who are high-school and college students today. Young Russians would not be as susceptible to anti-American propaganda if they had personal knowledge of the country, its political and judicial systems, business ethics, public life, diversified culture and habits, *etc.* To this end they must leave/study/work in the U.S. Are Americans ready to invest a mere percentage of the sums wasted for the Cold War into bringing Russian youth to America? Newly rich Russians and their offspring could afford it themselves, but Russia's future will be decided by thousands of ordinary Russians. Currently, only 10 million or so Russians (out of 145 million) had foreign passports to travel abroad. A majority of them used their passports for vacationing in Turkey, Egypt, or Southeast Asia, or doing business with Europe. Relatively few visited the United States with a scholarly interest.

Overall, however, Russian analysts remain skeptical about the degree to which these suggestions for improving relations will be followed. So as the previous "To Do" list may be too ambitious, here is a "To Do" and a "Not To Do" option: learn the lessons of the lost opportunities and dashed hopes of the 1990s, and try not to do more harm. The April 2010 signing of a nuclear arms limitation treaty in Prague by U.S. President Barack Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev shows that positive steps can be taken, and one hopes that this can continue.