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**Strobe Talbott at Occidental College**

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**Strobe's talk at Occidental last week.**

**Vladimir Putin vs. the 21st Century**

**Strobe Talbott**

**President of the Brookings Institution**

**Occidental College**

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[As prepared for delivery]

Thanks to **Sanjeev [Khagram]** for the introduction and to **Larry [Caldwell]** and **Derek [Shearer]** for bringing me back to **Oxy**. I've had fun and learned a lot over the past two days. Meeting with students and faculty has triggered memories of my own college days, which, in 2 ways, set the course of my life - one personal, one professional.

I met **Derek** the first week of our freshman year at **Yale**, 50 years ago. In addition to becoming a lifelong friend, he introduced me to his sister, **Brooke**, a **California** girl who became my wife.

I have **Russia** to thank for that double good fortune. **Derek** and I wouldn't have hooked up if we hadn't shared an interest the **USSR**, a country that no longer exists in those long-ago days had loomed on the horizon of the American consciousness like a dark cloud for 20 years and would continue to do so for another quarter century. **Derek** and I enrolled in an advanced **Russian** language class for two reasons: the richness of a great culture and a patriotic need to understand the **Soviet** threat. In our summers, we both took summer courses in **Russian** that were paid for by the **Pentagon**.

In September 1964, when **Derek** and I arrived at **Yale**, the leader of the **Soviet Union** was Nikita **Khrushchev**. Within a few weeks, he was fired. His **Kremlin** colleagues charged him with recklessness - or what they called "harebrained scheming" that embarrassed the **Soviet Union** and, in one notable case, endangered the world. He came very close to starting **World War III** by putting nuclear missile on **Cuba**.

**Khrushchev's** comrades overthrew him in a palace coup while he was vacationing in - get this - **Crimea**. They confined him to house arrest for the rest of his life. He was later also criticized for his decision, back in 1954, to transfer **Crimea** from the **Russian** republic of the **USSR** to the **Ukrainian** republic as a kind of birthday present on the 300th anniversary of **Russian** empire's conquest of the peninsula.

So you can see, this snippet from **Derek's** and my youth is part of the backstory of today's headlines. It also underscores the generational divide here tonight. For **Derek**, **Larry**, and other members of the faculty here, the memory of the cold war and the day-in-and-day-out fear that it might lead to **Armageddon** is deeply embedded in our own lives. For us, it's biography, while for the students here, that existential threat is the stuff of history. I'm guessing that most of the seniors were born in 1992. That was 3 years after the collapse of the **Berlin Wall** and the **Iron Curtain**, and a year after the breakup of the **Soviet Union**.

Those of you in your twenties have grown up in what may be seen by future historians as a uniquely charmed moment - one that has lasted for a quarter of a century - when all the major powers on earth, prominently including the **United States** and **Russia**, were not just at peace but seemed to be consolidating that peace in a way that could allow the human enterprise to get its act together and deal, cooperatively and effectively, with the challenge of this century, notably the new existential threat that faces your generation: climate change.

But it's also quite possible that future historians (some of whom may be the history majors among you) will look back on the past month as a back-to-the-future tipping point - not just a detour in **Russia's** evolution toward being a normal, modern state, but a U-turn, reverting to aspects of the czarist and **Soviet** past in a fashion and to a degree that cast a new shadow over your generation, your century, and your children's. So that brings us to the boss in the **Kremlin** today: **Vladimir Putin**. He, like **Khrushchev**, has a reckless streak. Here's a relevant footnote to his biography. In the second half of the 1980s, in the twilight of the **Soviet** era, **Putin** was helping run a network of spies from the **KGB** station in **Dresden, East Germany**. He held the relatively modest rank of lieutenant colonel. Why? Because his superiors didn't want to promote him further because they judged him to suffer from, and I quote, "a lowered sense of danger." That is, he was seen to be the opposite of risk-averse, someone who would take risks that might harm his country's interests. But that didn't stop him from becoming the most powerful **Kremlin** leader since **Stalin**. How that happened is a bizarre story itself, which I'll come back to.

What I want to focus on now is the reckless and dangerous scheme that **Putin** executed a month ago, even though it's being treated as masterstroke, including in some precincts in our own commentariat. The target, of course, was **Crimea**. It has a population comparable to that of San Bernardino County and is only half the size. But its annexation by a stroke of **Putin's** pen is a very, very big deal - and a very, very ominous one. It is the first expansion of direct rule from **Moscow** since 1945, nearly 70 years ago. That's significant all by itself: the largest state on earth - the only state that spans two continents - is expanding further, and doing so unilaterally and by force. **Putin** can now take a vacation of his own in **Crimea** without leaving what his government - and **Google** maps, by the way - now regards as **Russian** territory. **Putin** likes to compare himself to **Peter the Great** - **Russia's** iconic modernizer and westernizer - but he is actually channeling **Catherine the Great**, **Russia's** most audacious, insatiable conqueror.

The **Crimea** land grab is all the more significant because of what it means in the context of recent history, since the end of the cold war. In 1991, the year before the seniors here were born, **Putin's** predecessor in the **Kremlin**, **Boris Yeltsin**, made a decision of great wisdom, courage, and consequence.

As president of the **Russian Soviet Socialist Republic** when the **USSR** was splintering into 15 separate states, **Yeltsin** got his fellow leaders of the other breakaway republics, including the president of **Ukraine**, to agree that what had been the inter-republic borders of the **USSR** would become the international borders of the 15 new independent nations - and, crucially, that there would be no adjustments whatsoever. There would be no attempt to redraw the political borders to align with ethnographic composition of the populations on either side. Just as the **USSR** had been a multi-ethnic mega-state, so would all the new states that came into being with the end of the **Soviet** system and polity. That decision - which **Yeltsin** made stick in the face of fierce opposition from the **Russian** parliament - made it possible for the dismantlement of the **USSR** to be largely free of violence.

That was in marked contrast to what happened in **Yugoslavia**, another multi-ethnic communist state that came apart at the seams at roughly the same time. In other words, **Yeltsin** spared a political space that spanned 11 time zones and had tens of thousands of nuclear weapons the mayhem, ethnic cleansing, and genocide that engulfed the **Balkans** throughout the 1990s.

So with that background, here's the nub of what **Vladimir Putin** did last month: he repudiated and reversed **Yeltsin's** crucial decision. There is a colossal irony here, and it concerns **Putin's** ultimate promotion to the presidency of **Russia**. We would never have heard of this guy were it not for **Yeltsin**. Toward the end of his own presidency, **Yeltsin** plucked **Putin** from obscurity and made him president primarily for one self-serving, short-sighted, and I'd add utterly irresponsible reason: to protect **Yeltsin's** family from revenge and prosecution once **Yeltsin** himself moved out of the **Kremlin** into retirement.

**Putin** kept faith with **Yeltsin** on that point. But he totally betrayed and upended **Yeltsin's** political legacy in many ways, but most dramatically in redrawing the border between **Ukraine** and **Russia**. In this regard, more than any other, **Yeltsin's** handpicked successor has made himself the anti-**Yeltsin**.

**Putin** has been breathtakingly explicit and uncompromising on why he has done this and why he might do it again. In his speech to the **Duma** explaining the annexation, he congratulated himself for bringing **Crimea** back into the bosom of **Mother Russia**, and he vowed to protect her other children in neighboring countries - that is, ethnic **Russians** whom he called "compatriots" even though they are, under international law, citizens of other states.

There's a musty, somewhat obscure term for what **Putin** has now made a hallmark of his presidency and what he clearly intends to be his own legacy: **irredentism**. That word was born in 19th-century war-torn **Italy**, and the practice, one might have hoped, died in the 20th century, the most violent in human history. But now, thanks to **Putin**, it's back. Worst case, it could become not just a relapse on **Russia's** part but a contagion to other parts of the world.

Here's warning signal of that danger. Most of the **anti-EU** parties that are likely to do well in the upcoming parliamentary election in Europe have approved **Russia's** annexation of **Crimea** and applauded **Putin** for championing national identity as a basis for statehood. So not only has **Putin** created a precedent that he seems poised to follow elsewhere along **Russia's** periphery, if he gets away with it, other leaders with territorial aspirations may feel that precedent has been legitimated. In that sense, **irredentism**, now that it's found its 21st century incarnation, can be renamed "**Putinism**." Or at least it's the external manifestation of **Putinism**, because there's an internal manifestation as well.

It has always been the case that when **Russia** breaks bad beyond its borders, it breaks bad inside its borders as well. There is an organic link between its aggressive international behavior and its repressive domestic politics. As the **Kremlin** beats the drums against foreign enemies, it stokes p heightened vigilance on the home front against fifth columnists, traitors, and spies. Those categories tend to overlap with intellectuals, journalists, dissidents, opposition politicians and, of course, professors. We're seeing that in spades right now.

I don't want to leave the impression that **Putinism** came out of the blue as a result of the current crisis in **Ukraine**. It's been taking form for some time. There have been plenty of hints over the last 15 years that you can take the man out of the **KGB** but you can't take the **KGB** out of the man.

I saw one such hint myself when I first met him 1999. He was the **Kremlin** national security adviser, still three rungs away from the pinnacle of his power. It was a creepy experience. For no good reason, he let it drop in our conversation that he knew which **Russian** poets I'd written my dissertations on at **Yale** and **Oxford** - **Fyodor Tyutchev** and **Vladimir Mayakovsky** (if you want to know more about them, see Professor **Walt Richmond** after class). **Putin** wasn't flattering me. Quite the contrary, he was letting me know that his own alma mater, the secret service, had a thick file on me and that he'd studied it carefully.

By the way, the reason for our meeting was to avert a crisis at the end of the **Kosovo** war when some rogue generals in the **Russian** high command took advantage of one of **Yeltsin's** benders and sent troops that were supposed to be subordinate to **U.S.** command as part of peacekeeping force to seize a strategic airfield before **NATO** troops got there.

This breakdown in civilian control of the military was a hairy moment that could have ruined **U.S.-Russian** cooperation. It was unquestionably intended by the disgruntled generals to do precisely that. In my meeting with him, **Putin** didn't seem surprised, concerned, or apologetic about that prospect.

Six years later, in 2005, when **Putin** was president, I participated in a bipartisan task force sponsored by the **Council on Foreign Relations** that assessed the state and trend of **U.S.-Russian** relations. The group's report concluded that they were, and I quote, "clearly headed in the wrong direction... Contention is crowding out consensus." By the way, the co-chair of that effort was **Oxy's** own **Jack Kemp**.

Flash ahead 3 years to **Russia's** mauling of **Georgia** in August 2008. It has the look, in the rear view mirror, of a dry run for what is now happening in **Ukraine**. And speaking of that historically cursed country, the **Orange Revolution** a decade ago was, almost certainly, a wake-up call for **Putin-the-autocrat** - one that no doubt came to mind when there was a mild **Russian** version of people power in the fall of 2011 and the early months of 2012. That was when **Muscovites** and **Russians** in other cities turned out to protest **Putin's** self-anointed return to the **Kremlin**.

But it was not until this past winter's **Ukrainian** uprising against the corrupt, brutal **Yanukovich** dictatorship this past winter that **Putin** decided to go for broke by invading **Ukraine** and conquering **Crimea**.

Now let's look ahead and assess the global significance of **Putinism**. In a nutshell, it jeopardizes the progress the world as a whole has made in recent decades to put in place an international system based on integration, cooperation, and partnership.

That last word - **partnyorstvo** - is especially important and has an interesting etymology. It was introduced by **Mikhail Gorbachev** into the vocabulary of **U.S.-Soviet** relations 25 years ago, in 1989, much as he'd introduced **glasnost** and **perestroika** into the vocabulary of **Soviet** internal reforms (and example of how **Russian** domestic reforms tend to be accompanied by some version of **détente** with the outside world).

**Boris Yeltsin** made partnership a motto of post-**Soviet Russian** foreign policy. Partnership was personal in the relations between **Gorbachev** and **George Herbert Walker Bush**; then between **Yeltsin** and **Bill Clinton**. All four of those presidents, two **Russians** and two Americans, agreed on the need for what **Bush** called "a new world order."

In essence, what they had in mind was a system -- with buy-in from all the major powers -- that respected the sovereign right of individual states to govern themselves while collaborating through international institutions to deal with challenges that can only be met through global cooperation.

**Putin**, in his first two terms as president, paid lip service to the principle of partnership and maintained a degree of continuity in its application to **Russian** diplomacy.

That continuity is now broken, and that's bad for the entire world, since the country **Putin** rules remains crucial to the creation of the kind of international system that is required to ensure a peaceful and livable 21st century. Without **Russia**, it's hard to imagine an international system of the kind we need. **Russia** is eighth in the world in the trade of merchandise, hence an important member of the **W.T.O.** It's got more nuclear weapons than any country, including ours; hence it's essential to arms control. It's the fourth largest emitter of carbon (after **China**, the **U.S.** and **India**), so it's won't be possible to mitigate the effects of **climate change** without **Russia** as part of the effort. With 195 nations on the planet, the world needs a **G-20** as an unofficial but effective board of directors, just it needs a **UN Security Council** that can live up to its name by reaching compromises in support of global security.

In all these functions, **Russia** can be a facilitator or it can be a spoiler. **Vladimir Putin** is now, big-time, in spoiler mode. That's in large measure because his popularity at home has almost doubled, to 80% approval. Those in the **West** who are condemning him are, basically, making his day. He's acting and getting away with it, while we in the **West** are reacting -- and, to say the least, not having much effect on **Putin**.

To wit: look at what's happening today. **Vice President Biden** is in **Kyiv**, doing everything he can to shore up the interim government and increase the chances of free, fair election in less than four weeks. Meanwhile, **Putin** is doing everything he can to destabilize **Ukraine** and thwart the elections. He's doing this in flagrant

violation of the agreement that his own foreign minister, **Sergei Lavrov**, made with **Secretary Kerry**, **Cathy Ashton** of the **EU**, and the **Ukrainian** government just a few days ago. Yet **Putin** is getting away with it. He holds the high cards. It's far easier to disrupt a society and a polity that have been badly governed for 20 years than it is to calm things down.

In short, **Putin** has already escalated the crisis from annexation of **Crimea** to a virtual invasion of **Eastern Ukraine**. That means the **West** is very likely going to have to go to the next tier of sanctions. That's evoked cockiness and scoffing in **Moscow**. So we've got to buckle our seatbelts. We're in for a long, bumpy, and dangerous ride.

That doesn't mean that **Putin** will win the long zero/sum game he's playing. In fact, **Putinism** will, ultimately, fail. That's for three reasons.

First, **Putin's** exploitation of **Russian** nationalism is virtually certain to backfire abroad. It's popular in ethnically **Russian** parts of the peripheral states - what **Russians** call "the near abroad" - but it's arousing fear and resentment in those areas that are dominated by other nationalities, giving them all the more incentive to establish as many ties as possible to the **West**.

Second, **Putin's** **Russian** chauvinism has the potential to backfire at home. While **non-Russians** make up only about 20% of the population, they outnumber **Russians** in nearly a third of the country's vast landmass. By deliberately playing the card of exclusivist ethnic politics **Putin** may also be playing into the hands of separatists, secessionists, and terrorists - including **al-Qaeda-like Islamic** radicals - with dreams of a **Caucasus Caliphate** in **Chechnya**, **Dagestan** and **Ingushetia**. I can imagine that those same future historians I've mentioned before might someday look back on **Putin's** cakewalk into **Crimea** as the beginning of the unraveling of the **Russian Federation** itself. While that would make **Putin** guilty in the eyes of his own people a harebrained schemer, it's not an outcome for any of us to hope for, since **Eurasia** would be destabilized and, in large areas, radicalized in a way that would be nightmare for the world.

Third point: what **Putin** is offering his own people is atavistic and unappealing in the extreme: authoritarianism (what he calls "the vertical of power"); crony capitalism; endemic corruption; a resource-cursed backward economy; a crippled public health system; and a demographic crisis bedeviling the **Slavic** population.

In short, he's offering them a reinstatement of the worst and ultimately fatal features of the **U.S.S.R.**

I'm sure you've all noticed that **pro-Putin** forces in **Ukraine** as well as many of his supporters in **Russia** are waving not just the **Russian** tricolor but the **hammer-and-sickle** of the **USSR**, a flag that the citizens of that country and their reformist leaders cast onto the dustbin of history more than two decades ago.

It's worth remembering that **Soviet** communism lasted only a bit longer than the 64 years that is now the average lifespan of a **Russian** male. Because history is on fast-forward, there's every reason to expect **Putinism** is not - as some commentators believe - the inescapable and perpetual destiny of **Russia**. It's not encoded into the genes of the **Russian** people or **Russian** political culture.

**Putinism** is, however, a stark reminder of how important individuals are in affecting the course of history and shaping the future - in this case, for the worse.

But there's also been at least one other case, what it was stunningly for the better. I'm thinking back almost 30 years, to March 1985, when the **Soviet Politburo** closeted itself to pick a successor to **Konstantin Chernenko**, the third **gerontocrat** in a row to die in office. If that conclave had picked anyone other than **Gorbachev** -- **Gromyko**, **Grishin**, **Romanov**, **Aliyev** (if you want to know more about them, see **Professor Caldwell** after class) - there might still be a **USSR**, a **Warsaw Pact**, and a cold war.

By the same token, flipped back to the negative side, if **Yeltsin** had chosen a successor other than **Putin**, the **Yeltsin** legacy might have survived and we'd be talking about a very different set of issues tonight.

How long **Putinism** lasts is overwhelmingly up to the **Russian** people themselves, of course. But it will pass more quickly if there's a forceful voice, backed by national and international resolve, to oppose it. The obvious - and perhaps the only - candidate for that role is **Oxy's** most famous alumnus, and our 44th president.

**Barack Obama** is a personification of globalization of the world - and the globalization of America itself. He's also represents the generation between **Larry's**, **Derek's** and mine and yours, the students here. He was born the year before the **Cuban** missile crisis. He is well schooled in the overarching issues. He studied international politics with **Larry Caldwell** and political philosophy with **Roger Boesche**, and he wrote his senior thesis at **Columbia** on nuclear deterrence and arms control. He was 30 years old when the **U.S.S.R.** collapsed. So he's known first-hand the cold war world and the post-cold war world.

With nearly three years to go in his presidency, **Obama** is positioned to lay out - for his own citizens and our allies and friends abroad -- the contours of the post-post-cold war world - a world that we will, for some time, have to share with a **post-glasnost**, **post-perestroika**, and **post-partnership Russia**.

We need our president to spell out for us a vision for dealing with **Putinism** for as long as it lasts. He hasn't done that yet. That's in part because he senses, correctly, that the American people are weary of the burden of leadership abroad -- especially when it means expensive investments in messy situations. But that doesn't relieve him of his own burden of leadership.

Given what's happened in the last month and the stakes for the **U.S.** and the world, given the spreading doubts that **West** can't do anything to rein in **Putinism**, this is a moment that cries out for **Obama** to tell us, "Yes we can... and here's how."

Let's hope he seizes that moment - and that he does so soon. Come to think of it, why not invite him to do it right here? This is as good a **Bully Pulpit** as any.