

# US Ambivalence and the Russo-Chechen Wars: Behind the Silence

*By Elizabeth Bagot*

*Given the U.S.'s recent record of militarily intervening in cases of international human rights abuse, its failure to take a decisive stance regarding Russia's invasions of separatist Chechnya in the 1990s came as a surprise. Despite reports of major human rights abuse perpetrated by Russian soldiers against ethnic Chechens, the U.S. took a noncommittal stance, making only the occasional rhetorical appeal to Moscow. U.S. ambivalence toward the Russo-Chechen conflict arose from a strategic interest in supporting the new democratically-elected Russian government, courting an important ally in the War on Terror, and avoiding a "re-frosting" in relations between the U.S. and Russia. The Russo-Chechen conflict unmasked the hypocrisy of U.S. foreign policy, to which the U.S. will eventually have to answer when a similar conflict occurs elsewhere.*



A Chechen man picks up a loaf of bread in Grozny.

Mikhail Evstafiev

The current international climate, in which the paradigm of democracy promotion is gradually becoming the norm, has led the world community to expect certain behaviors on the part of the most aggressive democracy pusher—the United States. Major human rights abuses, such as those witnessed in Somalia from 1992-1995 and Bosnia-Herzegovina starting in 1993, have generally elicited an assertive response by the United States. The US-led NATO bombing of Kosovo in 1999 set a new precedent for intervention, topping off a growing list of US democracy promoting and protecting behaviors. In nations of particular interest to the United States, special attention has consistently been paid to the presence or absence of major democratic elements: freedom of expression, free and fair elections, free market reforms, and basic human rights. Thus, when the Russo-Chechen wars broke out in response to Chechen separatist movements in 1994 and again in 1999 on the soil of a nation in which the United States has spent over half a century promoting democracy (or containing communism), it came as a surprise that the United States failed to react with the level of gusto to which the international community had grown accustomed. In fact, the United States waited an entire month to even acknowledge that Russian actions in Chechnya—the torture, murder and rape of civilians, the creation of filtration camps, the slaughter of tens of thousands of Chechens, etc.—had violated international norms. Subsequently, the strongest reaction to come out of the United States has been the occasional rhetorical appeal for peace in Chechnya. It has not imposed economic sanctions, proposed the suspension of Russia’s membership in international institutions, or intervened militarily. Its failure to take a stronger stance on Chechnya, translating into tacit approval of Russia’s behavior, remains baffling to this day. However, a number of factors suggest that this passivity was indeed purposeful and even strategic. A combination of confusion over territorial integrity,

the strategic unimportance of Chechnya for the United States, concerns about democracy promotion in Russia, post-Cold War security interests, the need for a partner in the War on Terror, a lack of moral authority to condemn Russia’s behavior, and a sense of helplessness has prevented the United States from intervening in a meaningful way in the Russo-Chechen wars. Essentially, strategic interests have rendered it unwilling to condemn Russia’s actions.

The Clinton administration’s initial reaction to the Russian invasion of Chechnya in December 1994 was muted and sent the message that the United States had no intention of involving itself in the conflict. On December 11 at a Miami press conference, President Clinton announced that the ensuing war was “an internal affair, and we hope that order can be restored with a minimum amount of bloodshed and violence.”<sup>1</sup> At a time in which the United States lacked a clear position on the definition of the self determination of peoples and was somewhat confused over Chechnya’s right to secede, it rushed to defend Russia’s territorial integrity, asserting that Russia had the right to protect its own borders.<sup>2</sup> As American policy empirically tended to support already existing international boundaries and discourage the breaking up of nations into smaller and ethnically-based states, appeals to territorial integrity appear to have been more about convenience than anything else.<sup>3</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that the United States actually believed in its own position, especially considering its repeated disregard of state sovereignty in other parts of the world. By this point, international law had already established that massive human rights violations were not to be treated as the internal matters of the state, so it was somewhat unexpected that in the case of Chechnya the United States decided to remain neutral.<sup>4</sup> Its argument in defense of Russia’s territorial integrity seemed weak at best. When US Secretary of State Warren Christopher made the mistake of comparing the war in Chechnya to the US Civil War—even going so far as to compare President Yeltsin to Abraham Lincoln—it became clear that perhaps the United States was simply ignorant about what was actually going on in Chechnya. This ignorance was largely attributable to Chechnya’s lack of importance to US strategic interests, which provided a disincentive for the United States to invest time, attention, and resources in that region.

Claims to territorial integrity aside, the United States’ ambivalence regarding Chechnya reflected its disinterest in the region. Chechnya—a tiny region

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making up less than one percent of the Russian Federation, and home to the minority Chechen ethnic group—is located on the south-eastern edge of Russia, far from Moscow and even farther from most of Russian society. Most of the information coming out of Chechnya was delivered by the Russian government. At best the United States knew virtually nothing about the Chechen people and at worst it received highly biased information.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in which the United States had a vested interest due to the substantial Armenian diaspora living there, no critical US interests were at stake in Chechnya.<sup>6</sup> The United States would have gained little to nothing by intervening in the conflict. Even if it were to intervene with the sole motive of halting the Russian army's human rights abuses against Chechen civilians, the intervention would certainly have been very unpopular with the US public, who would have scorned the use of significant resources in a region most people had never heard of. President Clinton reflected this attitude in his treatment of the conflict:

The one official in the Clinton administration who most hated discussing Chechnya was Clinton himself. He obliged his staff in adding Chechnya to the talking points during phone calls and meetings with Yeltsin and then Putin, but he never devoted serious attention to the problem... In Clinton's mind, harping over a "small" issue like Chechnya should not be the central focus of American foreign policy toward Russia.<sup>7</sup>

In essence, Chechnya was simply not important enough to the United States for it to spend significant time and resources on it.

However, given that the United States had intervened in countries of no major strategic significance before (e.g. Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, East Timor, Haiti, etc.), it would be a mistake to attribute its indifference to the Russo-Chechen conflict solely to Chechnya's obscurity. In fact, Russia was (and still is) a country of major interest to the United States in terms of democratic development; thus, a cost-benefit analysis comparing the relatively obscure Chechnya with Russia as a whole undoubtedly left the United States with the clear impression that its true interests lie with Moscow, not Grozny. In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States' primary concern was that Russia followed through with its market and institutional reforms on the path to

becoming a legitimate democracy.<sup>8</sup> To criticize Russia's behavior in Chechnya at such a crucial turning point for the Russian government would be to risk slowing or even destroying the delicate process of democratization toward which the United States had dedicated so much of its energy.

The leadership of Boris Yeltsin, the first democratically elected president of Russia, was especially important to the United States during the Clinton administration. As evidenced by Clinton's close friendship with Yeltsin, his administration clearly felt that Yeltsin's presidency was crucial to the democratic cause in Russia, and this sentiment restrained Clinton from criticizing Yeltsin's questionable war in Chechnya. The United States feared that criticism of the Russo-Chechen war might cause a dip in Yeltsin's popularity, which would risk his re-election. Even worse, it might result in the election of communist supporters or fascist politicians such as Vladimir Zhirinovskii, who could potentially reverse Russia's democratic progress.<sup>9</sup> Within the Clinton administration, there was "a conviction that his [Yeltsin's] continuation in office, and friendly personal relationship with President Clinton, was indispensable both to continuing economic and political reform and to Russian-American partnership on a broad range of international issues."<sup>10</sup> Yeltsin was not just a symbolic figurehead of democracy; he proved willing to negotiate with the United States on a variety of significant issues including NATO expansion, the reduction of nuclear stockpiles, Iraq, Iran, and the development of friendly post-Cold War relations. Ironically, the United States was willing to support a leader who blatantly violated democratic norms in Chechnya in the name of upholding democracy.



Executive Office of the President

The Clinton Administration's close ties with Boris Yeltsin were essential to US Foreign policy ambitions. But at what cost were they maintained?

Democracy in Russia was not the only interest at stake for the United States when it decided to keep quiet on the subject of Chechnya. For the Clinton and the second Bush administrations, a key concern was the dismantling and reduction of nuclear weapons stockpiles in Russia. A top priority was to defrost relations with Russia and dispel leftover Cold War tensions.<sup>11</sup> Even though after the Cold War there existed no serious threat of Russian nuclear proliferation, the tense environment in which the post-Cold War US presidential administrations functioned was not easily overcome. Warren Christopher, Clinton's Secretary of State, best expressed the nature of this environment around the time the first Russo-Chechen war broke out: "...if Russia falls into anarchy or lurches back into despotism, the prices that we pay could be frightening. Nothing less is involved than the possibility of renewed nuclear threat, higher defense budgets, spreading instability, the loss of new markets, and a devastating setback for the worldwide democratic movement."<sup>12</sup> The United States simply could not risk upsetting the delicate balance already in place with Russia. Considering the progress that the two nations had already made throughout the Clinton and Bush administrations regarding nuclear disarmament—not to mention the gradual expansion of NATO—any upset in diplomatic relations would have been risky.<sup>13</sup> In the words of Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at the 1999 OSCE meeting in reference to Chechnya, "the last thing that we should be doing is trying to turn Russia back into an enemy."<sup>14</sup> President Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice echoed this sentiment during Bush's 2000 presidential campaign. Even State Department spokesman Michael Curry expressed exasperation at the attention (albeit scant) being paid to Chechnya, emphasizing its relative unimportance in comparison with the United States' larger security agenda with Russia.<sup>15</sup> In the eyes of Clinton and Bush, the United States faced a tradeoff: it could choose to defend human rights in Chechnya at the expense of souring its relations with Russia, or look the other way so as to preserve an already extremely precarious relationship with a major world power. Put quite simply, "many policymakers suggest[ed] that because Russia has nuclear weapons, little [could] be done to curb its human rights abuses."<sup>16</sup> Hence, a policy of appeasement toward Russia.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the motives behind US policy toward Chechnya fundamentally changed (although the policy itself did not). President Putin, snatching a unique opportunity

to adapt the context of the second Russo-Chechen war, called President Bush on the telephone within hours of the attacks to give him Russia's condolences.<sup>17</sup> From this point forward, Russia became one of the United States' top allies in the War on Terror, masterfully framing the Russo-Chechen war as a fight against Chechen terrorism. Although Putin had referred to the Chechens as terrorists even before September 11, the new international War on Terror lent even more legitimacy to this claim, so much so that any international criticism of Russia's human rights abuses in Chechnya would have appeared inappropriate. Indeed, "the eerie resonance of the destruction of New York's Twin Towers with the bombing of Moscow apartment blocks two years earlier...inevitably lent a retrospective sense of justification to everything Russia had done in Chechnya."<sup>18</sup> Moscow's claims of direct links between Osama bin Laden and Chechen rebel fighters, as well as its alleged discovery amongst Chechen rebels of plans detailing the high-jacking of planes, further cemented the new relationship of cooperation between Russia and the United States. The rhetoric Putin employed to demonize the Chechens as "bandits" evolved so seamlessly into rhetoric portraying the Chechens as Islamic extremists after 9/11 that it appeared almost natural, fitting perfectly into the new paradigm of anti-Islamic fundamentalism forged by the Bush administration.<sup>19</sup> In this new relationship of understanding between Putin and Bush, the United States certainly stood to benefit from having Russia as a partner in the War on Terror. However, the major drawback was that the United States consequently lost all its moral authority to question Russia's actions in Chechnya. Russia now compared its "counterterrorist" operations in Chechnya to the United States' counterterrorist campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, so to criticize the Russo-Chechen war would be to criticize the War on Terror. At this point, when it was feverishly recruiting for its War on Terror, the United States could not afford hypocrisy.

However, hypocritical foreign policy was nothing new for the United States. Throughout the 1990s it had engaged in a number of questionable foreign interventions, each one of which stripped the United States of any moral authority it would have otherwise possessed in criticizing Russia's policy toward Chechnya. Taking its cue from the lack of international criticism of United States interventions in Iraq, Haiti, and especially Kosovo, Russia surmised (correctly) that it could do with impunity whatever it wanted in

Chechnya. Indeed, the United States kept eerily quiet upon the invasion of Chechnya in 1994 and again in 1999. In spite of the country's infrequent, muted calls for a stop to human rights abuses in Chechnya, US officials knew very well "that the United States did not have the moral authority to be intervening in Russia's domestic affairs."<sup>20</sup> After all, the United States had invaded Haiti in 1994 for largely political reasons, circumvented international law by leading NATO in a bombing campaign in Kosovo in 1999 without the backing of the United Nations Security Council, and illegally invaded Iraq in 2003. If it could pursue its objectives with impunity, why couldn't Russia?

Some of Russia's most dysfunctional behavior in Chechnya was inspired by US interventions elsewhere. US officials knew this and decidedly chose not to call attention to it. A phone call between Sergei Yushenkov, chair of the Parliamentary Defense Committee, and Oleg Lobov, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, revealed Russia's use of US actions to justify its own during the first Russo-Chechen war:

On the telephone Lobov used the phrase that "It is not only a question of the integrity of Russia. We need a small victorious war to raise the president's ratings." There was the comparison; the parallel that Clinton in Haiti could perform a successful operation and his ratings immediately jumped up.<sup>21</sup>

Whether interpreted correctly or incorrectly by the Russian government, clearly US military interventions were viewed as both examples to follow and excuses for human rights abuses when Russia faced international criticism. As another example, Russia's use of fuel-air explosives—bombs that cause similar effects to those of nuclear weapons—to destroy Grozny received only muted criticism because the United States had used the same explosives during its military campaign in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.<sup>22</sup> Thus, if the United States had chosen to taken a stronger stance on Chechnya, it would have called attention to its own past behavior.

However, no episode of US hypocrisy proved more useful to the Russian argument of legitimacy in Chechnya than the US-led NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999. This military campaign, carried out against the vote of the United Nations Security Council, not only violated international law, it also signaled to Russia that force was a legitimate tool for dealing with acts of terrorism.<sup>23</sup> Viewing itself as the victim of Chechen terrorism, Russia considered its violent actions completely legitimate. As Anatol Lieven bluntly stated

in reference to the bombing of Kosovo, "...the truth is that the Russians are learning from what the United States and NATO have done in Kosovo, but they do not have the precision-guided munitions."<sup>24</sup> The United States and the rest of the international community knew that the bombing of Kosovo had given the Russian government fodder for legitimizing its actions in Chechnya. However, the international community was baffled at the United States' inconsistency; why did it choose not to intervene in the Russo-Chechen conflict as it had intervened in Kosovo?<sup>25</sup>

All of the aforementioned reasons for the United States' ambivalence fail to take into account whether it could have changed the course of events in Chechnya, even if it had taken a tougher stance. A general sense of helplessness, especially evident throughout the Clinton administration, suggests that the United States kept silent for strategic reasons, and because it felt it had no leverage over Russia.

And if the United States had adopted all of the alternative measures together—changing aid policy, supporting development in Chechnya, excluding Russia from the G-8—would Russia have adopted a different policy toward Chechnya? Probably not. At the end of the day, Russian leaders believed that they were fighting to defend their national security and preserve their territorial integrity. All other interests, including positive relations with the United States, were vastly subordinate.<sup>26</sup>

But as reasonable as the argument for US helplessness may be, it cannot fully explain the inertia permeating both the Clinton and Bush administrations. After all, the US government had undertaken military operations before without stopping to consider the possibility of failure. Indeed, many of its military operations had failed (e.g. Haiti and Iraq, to name a few). Why, then, would the United States have suddenly decided to restrain itself in the name of helplessness when it came to Chechnya?

Clearly, ulterior motives were at stake for the United States. It was no coincidence that both the Clinton administration and the second Bush administration adopted virtually identical policies toward Chechnya. Two decades after its end, the Cold War syndrome still permeates US relations with Russia. The Cold War itself may have ended, but it has not been forgotten. More than any other reason, the United States has chosen to keep quiet because it desperately wants to avoid a "re-frosting" of relations with Russia.

Exaggerated or not, this fear of another Cold War has come to dictate US policy toward Russia, so much so that it has chosen to overlook massive human rights abuses in favor of aiding Russia along the path to democracy. Tragically, this has translated into tens of thousands of deaths to both Chechens and ethnic Russians. Apparently, the United States considers the trade off worth its silence. In the future, if it chooses to finally condemn the Russo-Chechen conflict, it will have much to answer for. The trap it has built for itself—one of hypocrisy, international law-breaking, and impunity—could force it to keep silent for years to come. §

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Gail Lapidus, "Contested Sovereignty: the Tragedy of Chechnya," *International Security* 23.1 (1998): 5-49.
- 2 Patricia Carley, "Self Determination: Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and the Right to Secession," *United States Institute of Peace* (1996): 9.
- 3 Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand* (New York City: Random House, 2002). 149.
- 4 Cornell 91.
- 5 Gail Lapidus, "Contested Sovereignty" 5-49.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: US Policy Toward Russia After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution P, 2003). 275.
- 8 Lee Marsden, *Lessons From Russia: Clinton and US Democracy Promotion* (Ashgate Limited, 2005). 120.
- 9 Matthew Evangelista, *The Chechen Wars* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution P, 2002), p. 145.
- 10 Gail Lapidus, "Contested Sovereignty" 5-49.
- 11 Lee Marsden, *Lessons From Russia*. 43.
- 12 Ibid., 47.
- 13 Ibid., 86.
- 14 James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose*. 275.
- 15 Gail Lapidus, "Contested Sovereignty" 36.
- 16 Sarah Mendelson, "Russia's Rights Imperiled," *International Security* 26.4 (2002): 56.
- 17 John O'loughlin, Gearoid O Tuathail, and Vladimir Kolossov, "A Risky Westward Turn? Putin's 9-11 Script and Ordinary Russians," *Europe-Asia Studies* 56 (2004): 3.
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- 19 John Russell, *Chechnya - Russia's 'War on Terror'* (New York City: Routledge, 2007). 92.
- 20 James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose*. 284.
- 21 Lee Marsden, *Lessons From Russia*. 86.
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- 23 Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand*. 361.
- 24 James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose*. 284.
- 25 Sarah Mendelson, "Russia's Rights Imperiled," 53.
- 26 James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose*. 286.



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A Chechen man prays during the battle for Grozny.