
Winter is Coming

The Kasparov Neoconservative-Thermonuclear Gambit

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Tactics involve calculations that can tax the human brain, but when you boil them down, they are actually the simplest part of chess and are almost trivial compared to strategy.

— GM Kasparov

Twenty-two years ago the world chess champion expressed optimism that Russia's new president would continue Boris Yeltsin's liberal reforms. Garry Kasparov would lose his title in a long match against Vladimir Kramnik later that year (an old nemesis, the [Berlin Wall](#), returning to torment him in a new form), but he would never be wrong about Vladimir Putin again. After Russia annexed Crimea and intervened in support of separatists in the Donbas region in 2014, the sort of things Kasparov had been warning for years that Putin would do, he wrote a book titled [Winter Is Coming: Why Vladimir Putin and the Enemies of the Free World Must Be Stopped](#). I read it in March 2022, three weeks into Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine which has imperiled millions of civilians (with dozens being killed every day) as Russian artillery, navy, and air force bomb city centers and neighborhoods). The title is apparently a reference to the TV show *Game of Thrones* (though that's never explained in the book), and in the conclusion he explains that "'Winter is Coming' is a warning, not an inevitable

conclusion” (which makes the seasonal metaphor all the more confusing).

The prescient introduction, written after Russia’s 2014 invasion of eastern Ukraine, reads like it could have been written today. The rest of the book reads like a pro-war screed by an American neoconservative. Maybe a better label would be paleo-neoconservative because Kasparov expresses a strong desire for American foreign policy to return from the murky “war on terror” to the good old days of the anti-Soviet liberal war hawks like [Henry “Scoop” Jackson](#), the former US Senator from

<s>Boeing</s>

Washington. Kasparov writes that “I could happily fill several pages with Jackson’s powerful statements on why America had to live up to its ideals of freedom and democracy by actively promoting and defending them abroad.” I wonder if any of those pages would mention that Jackson’s vision of “freedom and democracy” included the forced exportation and internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

The pages that he did write contain some clear standalone statements that probably almost anyone could agree with. I especially like his one-line zingers sprinkled throughout (like “And experience has shown that you can often do just fine being on the wrong side of history if you are on the right side of a pipeline,” and “Then the World Cup was checked off Putin’s shopping list, though it’s hard to say which side is the less transparent, the Kremlin or FIFA”).

But much of the book consists of Kasparov’s personal commentary on various American and Russian leaders, mostly since 1989. His strongest praise goes to the “moral clarity and stubbornness” of Ronald Reagan. (“The Wall was torn down as Reagan had demanded and the evil empire fell. Lesser problems were left to lesser men.”) His strongest condemnation, of course, goes to Vladimir Putin, a hatred to which it seems all of his other political and moral values are subordinate. His praise for other US presidents correlates with how readily they’ve gone to war. Bush 41 gets

praise for protecting Kuwait (but he “passed on the golden opportunity to remove Saddam from power...”), Clinton was enamored of Yeltsin but at least he came to the defense of Kosovar Albanians by bombing Yugoslavia (Kasparov says that Clinton’s justifications for that bombing campaign also apply to NATO intervention in the Ukraine crisis today, which is somewhat ironic since Putin [used the same argument](#) from the “well-known Kosovo precedent” as justification for Russia’s intervention in the “independence” of Crimea), and Bush 43 allowed Afghanistan and Iraq to become expensive distractions from the real enemies in Moscow and elsewhere but at least he kept the idea of American interventionism alive (“Preemptive strikes and deposing dictators may or may not have been a good plan, but at least it was a plan”). Throughout the book he non-ironically refers to the Bush Doctrine of unilateral and preemptive war as a “freedom agenda” (the sort of doublespeak in defense of war that Putin would be proud of).

The only exception is the Obama administration, for which Kasparov has the most criticism. The ninth chapter of the book is titled “The Audacity of False Hope.” I remember a major feature of the Obama administration’s foreign policy to involve a complicated proxy war with Russia through its [intervention in the Syrian Civil War](#), so I was surprised by Kasparov’s mostly cold treatment of the 44th president. I can think of several factors which may explain it. The first is that Kasparov strongly preferred Republican John McCain in the 2008 elections, who was admittedly a much better fit rhetorically for Kasparov’s neoconservative instincts, so perhaps he was more biased against Obama than against other American presidents from the beginning. The second is that Russia’s annexation of Crimea took place during Obama’s watch, and Obama failed to use it as an excuse to escalate the conflict with Putin beyond a few additional sanctions. But the biggest factor, I think, is that for a man who demands war at every turn Kasparov also puts a surprising amount of stock in the *speech* of politicians, and he seems especially impressed by tough talk (er, “moral clarity and stubbornness”). It

strikes my cynical mind as both refreshing and naive, but he actually listens to and often believes what world leaders say. I think the importance he places on speech caused him to mistake Obama's approach to foreign policy of talking softly and quietly carrying out drone warfare as weakness and a willingness to acquiesce to belligerent speakers like Putin.

The book's opposition to imperialist wars extends exactly to the Kremlin, turning a blind eye to the much more destructive forces being amassed at NATO bases along the way. Kasparov details the humanitarian cost of Putin's invasions but ignores or excuses the cost of American invasions as necessary sacrifice. Likewise his condemnation of dictators is conveniently limited to those not aligned with the United States (with the exception of Pinochet, for unknown reason but to his credit).

But for someone on such inconsistent moral ground, he holds to it consistently to the point that in some cases he seems ready to defend what even other blind adherents to American empire would rather forget. He criticizes JFK for canceling the second round of bombings during the Bay of Pigs invasion, the CIA's embarrassing 1961 false-flag attempt to overthrow Castro, for example. (Kasparov's grand master-level interpretation is that JFK's "show of weakness" — and not the embedding unjustified act of aggression — is what prompted the USSR to deploy nuclear missiles to Cuba.) He claims that "the see-no-evil Western approach to the Russian Civil War in 1919 and Britain's Munich peace treaty with Hitler in 1938 paved the way for some of the most appalling tragedies of the twentieth century." Never mind the false comparison between a popular uprising to overthrow a Russian tyrant (a strange thing for Kasparov to smear given the subject matter of his book) with a treaty between two military powers, he seems to have actually forgotten that Western nations (including the USA and the UK) *did* [intervene](#) with tens of thousands of troops in the Russian Civil War!

In chess a distinction is made between tactics and strategy. Tactics are immediate threats, forced combination of moves

that provide a clear advantage to one player. Strategy involves more long-term planning according to heuristics and principles beyond the human ability to calculate concretely in hopes that a good position will later lead to tactical possibilities. Because in chess, ultimately, tactics win the game and a good position is merely what makes those tactics possible. This is the inverse of a worthwhile real-world moral and political philosophy in which a good position is the desired result, and short term tactics and compromises are mere means to that position. Kasparov treats the moral world like a chess game: principles are subordinate to tactics and he gives no greater vision for a human society beyond what he calls “modernity” and what sounds to me a lot like dismal, highly militarized, exploitative liberal empire forever.

In fairness, the book is intended mostly as a polemical tool to convince Americans to support more anti-Putin policies, a purpose which doesn’t exactly demand subtlety. But Kasparov’s lack of political circumspection is still striking. He seems completely oblivious to the possibility that the capitalist world order including American-led NATO wars could actually be undermining security or producing the conditions in which dictators thrive.

In the first chapter he relates that an early dissatisfaction with Soviet society was that he was made to feel uncomfortable about his wealth earned as a chess player. “For me to say that my neighbors in Baku should see my keeping the Mercedes I won in Germany as normal, healthy thinking was radical and subversive.” My impression is that this revolt toward materialism remains an important component of Kasparov’s political inclinations. After retiring from chess he moved to the USA where he could enjoy his wealth and champion American empire in the name of human rights. It’s as if Shevek, [being embarrassed of his orange blanket](#), moved to Urras and devoted himself to defending A-Io’s wars, crackdowns on dissent, and colonial exploitation of Anrres while always denouncing Thu’s similar policies. He calls himself an anti-Communist, but other than echoing

the shallow Cold War propaganda of both the USA and USSR that equates Communism with totalitarianism and Democracy with capitalism, he gives little hint that those words mean anything to him. (By those terms, who isn't an anti-Communist?) To underscore the confusion, most of his "anti-Communism" is directed at the privatization of Russian property by robber-baron oligarchs during Yeltsin's liberalization and the far-right authoritarian transformation of Russian society under Putin.

Of course I hope I'm not mirroring Kasparov's error of mistaking lesser evil for good by mistaking a lesser good for evil or minimizing the cruelty of Putin's nuclear mafia state by pointing out that liberal republics are themselves imperfect. My sympathies lie with all opponents of the wars and abuses of Putin's autocracy including the work Kasparov has been doing on that front over the decades — and *likewise* those against America and its allies. I emphasize the word *likewise* because it is a subtlety which Kasparov at times demonstrates a difficulty in comprehending. Such a consistent opposition to state violence he tends to dismiss as "whataboutism".

So what is to be done about the current Russian aggression? In a [Twitter thread](#) after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Kasparov re-emphasized what he has said in *Winter is Coming* and elsewhere, including:

- Financially isolate Russian billionaires (most of the world is finally taking this option seriously).
- Produce more oil and gas outside of Russia to deprive its war machine of funding ("You can't save the planet if you don't save the people on it")
- Support Ukraine with more weapons ("everything but boots on the ground")

In the book he was careful to say he did not favor boycotts that would hurt ordinary Russians, but more recently he has [said](#) the financial and trade blockade should be so thorough

that “Russia should be thrown back into the Stone Age to make sure that the oil and gas industry and any other sensitive industries that are vital for survival of the Putin regime cannot function without Western technological support.” He is now also calling for NATO to implement a no-fly zone above Ukraine (ie, to enter the war on the side of Ukraine and potentially expand the theater of conflict to the entire world).

In other words, when Kasparov looks at America he sees a country which no longer polices the world readily enough with its extensive military, doesn't provide enough weapons to partisans in armed conflicts, and doesn't frack enough gas. This is a glimpse at the world through the bizarre neoconservative lens.

Admittedly, in the immediate moment, my anti-war worldview is not very helpful. Unilateral pacifism being impossible, the question of Should there be violence? is meaningless when the violence is already happening. The only questions *are* tactical matters of weighing effective defenses against potential escalations. I didn't complain when NATO used its military might to protect Yazidis and Kurds from the slave “state” of ISIS, and I'm not going to complain if NATO thinks it can protect Ukrainian people without triggering a nuclear war.

But to allow one's political view to be entirely structured by these tactical considerations loses sight of a world where Putins and NATOs do not and cannot exist. And on the last pages of the book, we get a glimmer that maybe Kasparov can imagine such a world after all!:

And so my last policy recommendation is to listen to the dissidents, even if you do not like what they have to say. They are the ones who reveal to us the dark realities of our societies, the realities that most of us have the luxury to turn away from. [...] Every society has its dissidents, not just dictatorships. They speak for the disenfranchised, the ignored, and the

persecuted. Listen to them now, because they speak of what is to come.