



# KOSOVO

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## Learning from John McCain's Mistakes

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<http://www.antiwar.com/bandow/?articleid=13795>

John McCain's defeat has set off a scramble to control the Republican Party's ideological soul. The GOP should learn from Sen. McCain's mistakes. Despite his reputation as a foreign policy guru, his neoconservative instincts invariably led him astray. His embarrassing embrace of Georgia's unstable Mikheil Saakashvili highlighted McCain's poor judgment, though the Republican Party's problem runs far deeper than policy toward any particular country.

Conservatives once opposed international social engineering, but transforming other societies at gunpoint became GOP gospel under President George W. Bush. Sen. McCain was even more belligerent, over time backing war in the Balkans, Mideast, and Asia. And he preferred invasions. In 1999 he demanded a ground war against Serbia, arguing that the Clinton administration's bombing campaign, undertaken to achieve an objective utterly irrelevant to American security – the de facto independence of Kosovo – was insufficiently aggressive. (The result of US policy is a nominally independent statelet that depends on the West for its survival, is shunned by the majority of nations, treats human rights as an afterthought, and has become precedent number one for countries to intervene in the affairs of other nations.)

Nor does neoconservatism view nuclear confrontation as something to avoid. When the crisis in the Caucasus erupted in August, Sen. McCain enthusiastically backed "Misha," as he called his friend Saakashvili. McCain advocated supporting Georgia against Russia and called for bringing Tbilisi into NATO, thereby committing the US to go to war against nuclear-armed Russia should hostilities again erupt. Sen. McCain mixed the rhetoric of resisting appeasement and promoting democracy to justify taking sides in a red-hot conflict along Russia's border: "we are all Georgians now," he proclaimed.

Intervening on Georgia's behalf obviously was madness then. It has become increasingly obvious that it was unprincipled madness, for Georgia actually was the aggressor. Allied support for Tbilisi has made the world a more dangerous and less democratic place.

Georgia has a convoluted history typical for Central Asia. Once independent, it eventually was absorbed by the Russian Empire. Georgia enjoyed short-lived independence after the Russian Revolution, before falling to a Bolshevik invasion. Abkhazia and South Ossetia long enjoyed autonomy or independence, including a special status within Georgia while part of the Soviet Union. Soviet law gave them a claim to separate from Georgia when it seceded from the Soviet Union. Newly independent Georgia ran through multiple presidents amid extensive violence, while Abkhazia and South Ossetia, backed by Moscow, defenestrated their Georgian overlords, as well as many ethnic Georgian citizens. Saakashvili was elected Georgian

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president after leading the "Rose Revolution" in 2003; one of his election promises was to reconquer the two lost provinces.

There is no obvious right or wrong outcome to the region's multifarious disputes. Nor was there any obvious reason to support either side when hostilities erupted in August.

The Georgian government never was much of a friend, let alone an ally worthy of inclusion in NATO. True, Saakashvili is American-educated and took power with US support. Sen. McCain met "Misha" while chairing the International Republican Institute, when he apparently gazed into Saakashvili's eyes and saw a democratic champion. But Saakashvili's record looks very different to more objective analysts.

After taking power Saakashvili exhibited a brutal edge, threatening to "liquidate" bandits and fire on tourist ships that violated Georgia's territorial waters. His wide-ranging "anti-corruption" campaign appeared to be directed more to securing his power. Human Rights Watch reported that his policies seemed "to fuel rather than reduce abuses."

Today Georgia is a "semiauthoritarian" state, argues Lincoln A. Mitchell of Columbia University. He contends that "the Saakashvili government is the fourth one-party state that Georgia has had during the last 20 years, going back to the Soviet period." Saakashvili's wife favorably compares the supposed democratic champion to other Georgian "strong leaders," such as Joseph Stalin and Lavrenti Beria.

Several groups, including Penal Reform International, have pointed to poor prison conditions, including substantial overcrowding, under Saakashvili. Despite supposed government reforms, Amnesty International reported that it "has continued to receive reports about torture and ill treatment in Georgia. Many cases still do not come to light because police cover up for their crimes and detainees are often afraid to complain or identify the perpetrators for fear of repercussions. Impunity for torture is still a big problem."

After being accused of murder in September 2007 by his former chief prosecutor, interior minister, and defense minister Irakli Okruashvili, Saakashvili had Okruashvili arrested and, many think, tortured, after which the latter recanted his charges. The case led to large public protests, causing Saakashvili to crack down on the opposition. The police brutally broke up demonstrations, using what Human Rights Watch termed "violent and excessive force." And the problems continue. Earlier this year the State Department pointed to "government pressure on the judiciary" and "law enforcement offices acting with impunity."

The Saakashvili government also targeted journalists. Last year's state of emergency banned broadcasts by CNN and the BBC. Most dramatic was the on-air police raid and closure of Imedi television, owned by an opposition (and business) leader – and a Fox affiliate. The Saakashvili government claimed that the station's broadcasts were part of a coup plot by opposition leaders. Investigative journalist Nino Zuriashvili

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contends that "there was more media freedom before the Rose Revolution." Sozar Subari, the independent human rights ombudsman appointed by parliament, says that the image of Georgia proceeding down the road to democracy with a free press is a "myth." Even today Freedom House gives Tbilisi poor ratings for press freedom.

Then came the war. Whatever the merits of Georgia's and Russia's respective positions over the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which had long sought an existence separate from Georgia, the West's attack on Serbia left the US and Europe ill-positioned to intervene. In 1999 the US and other NATO members launched an aggressive war against Serbia, which had neither attacked nor threatened to attack any alliance member, to support ethnic-Albanian secessionists in the territory of Kosovo. Then last February, in violation of international law, the allies formally dismembered Serbia, backing Kosovo's independence. Washington's claim that Kosovo was unique was too obvious a case of special pleading to be taken seriously by anyone other than the US and a few members of NATO. The intensity with which the allies insisted that they and they alone were entitled to decide what was and was not international law merely highlighted the weakness of their claim.

Of course, Moscow may have been more interested in punishing Tbilisi than in supporting Abkhazian and South Ossetian self-determination when it deployed the Kosovo precedent. But Russia's cynicism doesn't change the character of Georgia's actions. Tbilisi's claim to rightfully rule the territories is no better, and actually less compelling, than that of Serbia to govern Kosovo.

Moreover, it has become increasingly obvious that Georgia struck first in August, lighting "a match in a roomful of gas fumes," as former secretary of state Colin Powell put it. The German publication *Spiegel* online recently reported that "One thing was already clear to the officers at NATO headquarters in Brussels: They thought that the Georgians had started the conflict and that their actions were more calculated than pure self-defense or a response to Russian provocation. In fact, the NATO officers believed that the Georgian attack was a calculated offensive against South Ossetian positions to create the facts on the ground."

The war began with a Georgian assault on Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, on the night of August 7. Such an attack long had been planned, admitted Okruashvili, defense minister from 2004 to 2006. In May 2006 former Foreign Minister Salome Surabishvili complained of the government's "enormous arms buildup." Col. Wolfgang Richter, who serves with Germany's General Staff and as an adviser to the German mission to the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE), reported that Georgia began amassing troops on the South Ossetian border in July. None of this is surprising: After all, recapture of the two territories was a longtime Saakashvili objective.

But Saakashvili claimed that Georgia acted only after separatists shelled Georgian villages. New accounts suggest border clashes did not trigger Tbilisi's attack. The Georgians and South Ossetians had routinely fired on one another yet, reports *Spiegel* online: the Georgians "coolly treated the exchanges of fire in the preceding days as



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minor events. Even more clearly, NATO officials believed, looking back, that by no means could these skirmishes be seen as justification for Georgian war preparations."

Yet Tbilisi would still have been criminally irresponsible if it had invaded in retaliation for separatist attacks. Georgia's claim to the territory was contested. An uneasy truce reigned and war would offer Russia a perfect excuse to strike. Beneficent acquiescence by Moscow was unlikely, since Russia had backed the two territories in their fight against Tbilisi, garrisoned both with "peacekeeping" troops, recently conducted military maneuvers across the border, not yet withdrawn the extra forces, and viewed the Saakashvili regime as hostile.

Yet despite these circumstances, admitted Georgia's Deputy Defense Minister Batu Kutelia, his government didn't expect the Russians to strike: "We did not prepare for this kind of eventuality." He added that "I didn't think it likely that a member of the UN Security Council and the OSCE would react like this." Wishful thinking is dangerous for anyone, but to bet the survival of one's nation on Russian forbearance in the face of such an obvious provocation was reckless beyond imagination. Perhaps "Misha" counted on his friendship with Washington to protect him, but if so, he badly miscalculated.

However, even this theory gives Saakashvili too much credit. Evidence continues to accumulate that Saakashvili engaged in premeditated aggression rather than reckless retaliation. Tbilisi charged that South Ossetia initiated hostilities and Russia sent troops into South Ossetia before Georgian forces advanced: both claims appear to be false. The only impartial military observers in South Ossetia were from the OSCE. Newly publicized reports indicate that they witnessed no South Ossetian attacks on Georgian villages. Rather, the initial bombardment came from Georgian forces on Tskhinvali.

For instance, Ryan Grist, a former British soldier serving as an OSCE monitor, told the *New York Times*: "It was clear to me that the attack was completely indiscriminate and disproportionate to any, if indeed there had been any, provocation." Another British military officer, Stephen Young, who headed the OSCE mission, stated: "If there had been heavy shelling in areas that Georgia claimed were shelled, then our people would have heard it, and they didn't."

Moreover, the Georgian attacks began before Russian tanks were reported in the Roki Tunnel, the passageway between Russia and South Ossetia that Tbilisi apparently hoped to block as part of its plan to overrun the territory. Russian forces did not respond to the Georgian bombardment for several hours – estimates of the delay range from seven to fifteen hours. *Spiegel* online observes: "This sequence of events is now seen as evidence that Moscow did not act offensively." The publication adds that after Col. Wolfgang Richter briefed Bundestag members on the conflict one parliamentarian observed "It is clear that there was more responsibility on the Georgian than the Russian side."



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Tbilisi's response to the recent report from the OSCE monitors was characteristic: it claimed that the OSCE monitors had been bought off by the KGB. Saakashvili also reiterated his claim that a failure to back him threatened to result in "a never-ending story of Russian aggression." The Bush administration was equally unwilling to accept responsibility for its blunders. State Department Deputy Spokesman Robert Wood said: "I think we need to get away from looking at who did what first, because, as I said, I don't think we'll ever really get to the bottom of that." In short, argues the administration, so what if we – yet again – misled the American people and made the US less safe while pursuing neoconservative fantasies? Why should the facts matter in intervening around the world?

Not only was Tbilisi the likely aggressor. Georgia apparently targeted civilian areas in its initial assault. Admittedly, Russian claims of genocide were silly and Moscow's military response was excessive – Vladimir Putin was ready to use any excuse to punish the Saakashvili regime. However, Human Rights Watch (HRW) has concluded that the Georgian government, contrary to its public claims, not only used cluster bombs (as did Russia) in populated areas, but used them on Georgian territory, where they malfunctioned on an "absolutely massive scale," according to Marc Barlasco of HRW. *Georgian* civilians died as a result.

Even worse, Georgian forces may have committed war crimes. Reported the BBC: "Eyewitnesses have described how [Georgia's] tanks fired directly into an apartment block, and how civilians were shot at as they tried to escape the fighting." HRW's Allison Gill complained of "the misuse, the inappropriate use of force by Georgia against civilian targets." Ryan Grist says that the Georgian assault "was clearly, in my mind, an indiscriminate attack on the town [of Tskhinvali], as a town."

While Saakashvili might be the most culpable party, his American backers were no less irresponsible. The Bush administration resolutely backed Tbilisi's unprovoked aggression. Sen. McCain proclaimed that "We're all Georgians now" even though Saakashvili's forces opened their assault by attacking civilians.

While both the administration and Sen. McCain, despite their bombastic rhetoric, stepped back from direct military confrontation with Russia, Washington did send troops and ships into a war zone along Russia's border to provide aid. And with administration backing Congress voted to send \$1 billion to relieve the Saakashvili government of the cost of its recklessness.

Even worse, the administration continues to press (as Sen. McCain advocated) for Georgia's membership in NATO. The Europeans are skeptical, so US officials are trying to concoct a substitute embrace for the Saakashvili government. One possibility would be to finance and upgrade Georgia's military. This is a foolish and even dangerous strategy.

Having previously embraced Saakashvili, it was embarrassing for the US to step back when Russia pummeled Georgia, but the latter was not officially an ally and did not possess a formal security guarantee from Washington. Bringing Tbilisi into NATO





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would commit the United States to defend Georgia from Russia in any renewed conflict.

Apparently "Misha's" friends believe that such a guarantee would be costless. Merely threaten the Russians with intervention, and nothing would happen. But Moscow already has proved that it believes its border security is important enough to defend with force. Russia is not likely to find America's threat to risk war to support Tbilisi's territorial ambitions to be credible. Moreover, even if Moscow perceives a threat of US intervention, it is likely to view the consequences of not acting to be even more costly. For the Putin government to "appease" America by allowing Washington to ring Russia with hostile states would be about as likely as a McCain administration standing idly by as the Soviet Union concluded military alliances with Canada and Mexico.

While NATO membership might not deter Russia from confronting Tbilisi, it almost certainly would embolden Georgia. If Saakashvili was willing to start a war in the hope that the West, in the absence of any formal alliance, would rescue him, imagine what the impetuous, irresponsible demagogue would do if he thought he could count on Article 5, which proclaims that an attack on one member of NATO is an attack on all members.

The scenarios go from bad to worse. For instance, NATO member Georgia initiates another attack on South Ossetia (or Abkhazia). Russia responds even more forcefully than before, perhaps aiming to occupy Tbilisi. The US demands that Moscow withdraw and ... does something. Intervene with ground forces? Bomb Russian forces? Send ships into the Black Sea?

Russia not only has local conventional superiority, but a large edge in tactical nuclear weapons, which Moscow might see no choice but to use if Washington escalated with naval or air power. If Washington responded by going on full nuclear alert, Russia could play the same game. And then what? American involvement in a war along Russia's border likely would be as dangerous as the Cuban missile crisis.

For alleged conservatives to advocate such a policy demonstrates how neoconservatism has perverted traditional conservative notions of foreign policy. NATO was created for defense, not offense. The US believed that it was inimical to America's national interest for the Soviet Union to dominate Western Europe. There was never serious consideration of inaugurating World War III to liberate Eastern or Central Europe – which is why Washington uncomfortably but correctly stood by as Moscow crushed East German demonstrations in 1953, the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, and the 1968 Prague Spring. And people focused their sympathies on victims of the Soviet Union, not imperial Russia. When Americans talked about the Captive Nations, they meant the Baltic states, not Georgia.

The claim that the US government suddenly has discovered vital interests at stake in the Caucasus two decades after the close of the Cold War is bizarre. In Georgia the energy interests are small and the security interests nonexistent. A controversy over



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the status of two small pieces of the former Soviet Union, located within a slightly larger piece of the former Soviet Union, sitting next door to the dominant part of the former Soviet Union, is not worth \$1 billion in aid, let alone a promise to go to war. One can readily sympathize with the Georgian people – though not the Saakashvili regime – but that sympathy offers no basis for potential US military involvement in a war with Russia.

Indeed, the Bush/McCain policy towards Georgia demonstrates an almost complete lack of balance so valued by traditional conservatives. Warned President George Washington in his famed Farewell Address: "a passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest, in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification."

What could be more true in the case of the aggressive and authoritarian Georgian government? Washington's passionate attachment to "Misha" risks involving the US in Georgia's quarrels and wars. In return the US has received no adequate inducement. To the contrary, present policy could prove to be costly beyond measure.

Washington's ties to Tbilisi are an international makeweight. In contrast, relations with Moscow really matter. Most importantly, Russia is the one nation that, despite all of its setbacks since the end of the Cold War, still possesses the military capability to destroy the US. Its aid is important in promoting nonproliferation in Iran and North Korea. Its acquiescence on the United Nations Security Council is necessary to win UN support for US priorities. Its energy supplies keep Europe warm and well-lit. Its attitude towards the West will help determine whether Central and Eastern Europe enjoy reasonably uncomplicated and stable development in the years ahead.

The conservative movement has gone badly astray over the last eight years. It's not just the idea of preventive war and nation-building in Iraq. It's the arrogant assumption that Washington can dictate to any nation in any circumstance in any region and the foolish unwillingness to balance competing interests. Even more fundamental, the US government's principal foreign policy objective has gone from defending America to engaging in social engineering. Bush/McCain conservatives have exhibited the sort of arrogant delusions so characteristic of Wilsonian liberalism. As the conservative movement regroups from its well-deserved defeat, it needs to rediscover America's more restrained foreign policy tradition. The Right should meet the likely interventionist liberalism of Barack Obama not with the warmongering neoconservatism of the last eight years, but the republican detachment, focused on both peace and prosperity, of the more distant past.