

American Impotence

August 2008

By Harm de Blij

Was it ever worse? A lame-duck President of the United States at the Olympic Games in China lectures his hosts in Thailand, makes offensive remarks about God and religion in Beijing, and sits within earshot of the architect of the Georgia invasion, obviously unaware that it is happening. A Secretary of State traipses to an outdoor microphone somewhere near the White House to tell the Russian Empire to desist in Georgia. One of two candidates for the presidency of the United States is unable to pronounce the name of the beleaguered country's president on three separate occasions (had this leader with all his military credentials even heard of President Shaakashvili before?). "We are all Georgians", he later says with remarkable originality – or was it "Ich Bin Ein Georgier?" The other candidate, vacationing in Hawaii, emits another of his stirring philosophical generalities. French President Sarkhozy, also president of the European Union, performs the shuttle diplomacy that produces the first ceasefire, with no discernable American input.

Places with power organized as national states tend to do things of the kind Russia is doing in Georgia. American forces not long ago went into Grenada, Panama, Iraq and Afghanistan because the "national interest" was deemed to require it. Soviet Russia was a colonial power; its ethnic and cultural residue remains in the "near-abroad" as that of other former colonizers does in other parts of the global periphery. Leaders of present-day Russia may not see the similarities between their ruthless assault on Chechnyan secessionists and Georgia's efforts to establish its authority over secession-minded minorities in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but nationalism and rationalism tend to be mutually exclusive. If the products of Russia's puppet-show democracy see Georgia as a test case for their other interventions in the "near abroad" forged during imperial times, the world will need better leadership than it is getting.

Secretary of State Rice reputedly is a Russian expert. One must believe that she alerted President Bush and his cohorts to the risks arising from NATO encroachment on Russia's borders, proclamations of support for Kosovo's secession from Serbia, implantation of missile-defense systems in the Czech Republic and Poland, and other steps opposed by Moscow but taken in the belief that Russia's weakness would preclude serious counteraction. Now the American government is a mere bystander as the consequences imperil a democratic state whose military contingent in Iraq was the third-largest before being flown back to Georgia. Remember the days when Bush looked into Putin's eyes and saw his soul? One wonders what it was Putin recognized.