

# The Asquith Analogy

Georgia is the new Belgium.

By Daniel Koffler

THE ABORTIVE WAR over South Ossetia and Abkhazia has inspired a surge of historical analogies. According to overwrought commentators like Roger Kimball of *The New Criterion*, “August 8 was the date when Russia began reassembling the former Soviet empire in earnest,” while in the comparatively temperate assessment of John McCain, Putin merely wants “to restore the old Russian empire.” For neoconservatives, naturally, the standoff in the Caucasus recalls nothing so much as Munich 1938—Robert Kagan needed only one prefatory sentence in his *Washington Post* op-ed to invoke “the Sudeten Crisis that led to Nazi Germany’s invasion of Czechoslovakia.” William Kristol capped off a *New York Times* column by asking, “Is it not true today, as it was in the 1920s and ’30s, that delay and irresolution on the part of the democracies simply invite future threats and graver dangers?”

In this deluge of commentary, almost every analogue bearing even the most superficial resemblance to the Russia-Georgia conflict has received its share of attention. (Give Council on Foreign Relations fellow Max Boot an Olympic gold for simultaneously likening the Russian invasion to Soviet, Nazi, Italian fascist, and imperial Japanese aggression.) But the most fitting historical precedent has gone unmentioned. In trying to decide what to do in the Caucasus, the United States finds itself in a position strikingly similar to that of Great Britain in 1914. After Germany’s invasion of Belgium, Prime Minister H.H. Asquith and Foreign Secretary

Edward Grey faced a choice between neutrality and intervention. The decision they made proved fatal.

All the reasons today’s Russia hawks can give for taking hostile action were available, *mutatis mutandis*, to Asquith, Grey, and their colleagues. Additionally, unlike the United States today, Britain in 1914 had an unimpeachable justification for intervention in the form of Article VII of the 1839 Treaty of London, which bound signatory states, including Britain and Germany (the latter having inherited Prussia’s diplomatic obligations), to uphold the “perpetual” independence and neutrality of Belgium and by implication to defend it against attack.

Asquith and Grey’s decision to honor Britain’s guarantee to Belgium—surely a weightier commitment than whatever *sotto voce* understandings might exist between the Georgian president and the lobbyists in Senator McCain’s foreign-policy team—ranks high among the worst strategic decisions ever made. The price of victory for Britain in World War I was ultimately the dissolution of its empire and its decline to the status of a second-tier power. The cost to the world at large included adding millions of deaths to the butcher’s bill of the Great War, the unleashing of both Bolshevik and fascist oppression, the even greater carnage of the war’s sequel, and the descent of the Iron Curtain. To this day, aftershocks of Asquith’s folly are felt in places like Baghdad, Harare, Belgrade, and Karachi. For all of these and many other human disasters, the British cabinet’s determination to gamble on

war with Germany was a necessary—albeit insufficient—condition.

The best that can be said in defense of the decision-makers in London is that the conflict upon which they embarked had no precedent, and they couldn’t have known what would follow their declaration of war. But with the example of 1914 behind us, there is no excuse for repeating the errors of the Asquith-Grey government and launching an avoidable war against a power that can only be defeated at a staggering cost—if it can be defeated at all.

The lessons of the summer of 1914 can scarcely be clearer. But that has not deterred a cadre of cut-rate Edward Greys—some of whom, like Kristol, Kagan, and Boot, have the ear of the man who might become the next president—from advocating, among other things, expelling Russia from the G-8; imposing severe diplomatic and economic sanctions; boycotting Russian-hosted international athletic competitions and barring Russian athletes from contests outside their country; accelerating the expansion of NATO to include states like Georgia; and installing missile defense and other weapons systems on Russia’s doorstep in Eastern Europe. Most troubling of all is Boot’s proposal to ship shoulder-mounted anti-tank missiles to Georgia. Apparently, the way to show solidarity with our Georgian brethren is to use them to wage a proxy war against Russia.

The columnists pushing for provocative measures do not, of course, explicitly demand war. But then, the members

of the British Cabinet in July and August 1914 did not call for all-out war immediately after the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, either. Rather, at every juncture they took steps to make war more likely, persevering in the face of predictable German responses, until the results of their own decisions led them to reckon war inescapable.

The popular conception of the First World War as the inevitable product of grand historical forces began with the self-serving and highly influential post-war memoirs of Asquith, Grey, and Winston Churchill on the British side and those of Bethmann-Hollweg and others among the Germans. Grey had actually protested as early as May 1915 that he “had no power to decide policy” in the July Crisis of the previous year.

The assumption of the war’s inevitability—which conveniently absolved the guilty parties of their personal responsibility—became the prevailing view as it took hold in literary portrayals of the war from Erich Maria Remarque and Karl Kraus. Yet in spite of the blunders of European statecraft in the years leading to war, every stage in the conflict’s escalation was eminently preventable. The only insurmountable obstacle to avoiding war was the unwillingness of those in power to pull their countries back from the precipice.

Today’s blundering hawks find historical determinism every bit as useful as Asquith once did. Reassessing the Iraq conflict in *Slate* last year, Christopher Hitchens contended that “Iraq was headed straight for implosion and failure, both as a state and a society, well before 2003” and therefore “canceling or postponing an intervention would only have meant having to act later on, in conditions even more awful and dangerous than the ones with which we have become familiar.” One can be sure of a similar line emerging if the neocons succeeded in getting the United States into a

proxy war with Russia. Already, with their rhetoric likening the Caucasus crisis to the beginnings of World War II, Kristol and Kagan are leaning heavily on a theory of historical inevitability—Russia must behave as Germany once behaved, and the U.S. must again play the role of savior.

If history did repeat, there would be a clear if grim rationale for pre-emptive war against every nation on the neoconservatives’ enemies list, since the only alternative would be to concede the tactical initiative in conflicts that are coming no matter what we do. But this

view of history is wrong. It was no more inevitable that Britain and Germany would be plunged into war in the early 20th century than it was inevitable that the United States and Soviet Union would go to war in the late 20th century. The decision-makers in the latter case, fortunately, could look back on earlier World Wars to see how they might avoid making the mistakes of previous leaders—as we would do well to look to the lessons of World War I today. ■

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# Biden Time

Obama finds his Dick Cheney.

**By W. James Antle III**

THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY didn’t set out to hand its nomination to the least experienced major presidential candidate. But if Democrats wanted a nominee who stood from the beginning with the majority of their voters against the invasion of Iraq—and they did not want to nominate Dennis Kucinich or Mike Gravel—they had little choice. Barack Obama’s response to the charge that he was unprepared to lead was simple: he alone among the viable contenders possessed the judgment to oppose the Iraq War before the shock and awe faded. Implicit in this rejoinder was a willingness to reject the soft neoconservatism that has come to dominate the Democratic foreign-policy establishment.

So what message did Obama send by picking Joe Biden as his running mate? A Gilda Radner-like, “Nevermind.” Certainly, Obama could have done worse. Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine would have

given the Democrats a pair of leaders who began the decade in the Illinois state senate and on the Richmond city council. Evan Bayh would have given Obama a running mate who voted for the Bush tax cuts and a Republican opponent who voted against them.

It is nevertheless difficult to reconcile Obama’s choice with a desire to shake up the Democratic establishment—Biden, a classic Washington pol, is a fixture of that elite. He has been in the Senate for six terms and first made a run for the Democratic presidential nomination 20 years ago, back when Neil Kinnock was actually the British Labour leader and not merely some fellow whose speeches Biden once cribbed.

Biden voted for the Iraq War, agreeing with the Bush administration that Saddam Hussein in 2002 was “a long term threat and a short term threat to our national security,” as well as “an extreme