

Putin Ignores Obama's Goodwill Gesture

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The Magnitsky list that the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama released on Friday was toothless. The administration left off every Russian official that it thought might irritate the Kremlin. Hoping to earn points with President Vladimir Putin for the watered-down blacklist, Obama sent his national security adviser, Thomas Donilon, to Moscow to meet with Putin and other top officials on Monday.

But instead of gratitude, Putin just stopped in for a minute to pick up the letter from Obama that Donilon brought for him, while leaving Donilon to spend most of his time with a mere deputy foreign minister.

There are only a few things in life more irritating than making concessions to a scoundrel who then responds with rudeness. The normal reaction to such treatment would be for Washington to expand the Magnitsky list to include more prominent Russian officials.

But the Kremlin has little to fear in this regard. Obama's entire policy toward Russia is that of a decent, respectable man apologizing to a drunken thug on a public bus who deliberately steps on his feet to prove his own self worth, all the while knowing that the decent man would never threaten to retaliate with force.

The Obama administration has repeatedly shown it can act like a decent person, even in difficult times. For example, even after the U.S. embassies in Cairo and Benghazi were sacked by angry mobs last fall, Obama still said he deplored the U.S.-made video that insulted the religious feelings of Muslims.

Against that backdrop, a little kowtowing to the Kremlin seems like a trifle. Decent people simply cannot understand that a common thug is incapable of compromise and that every compromise a well-meaning person makes only inspires the thug to more attacks. This is all the more true considering that Russia is not a major global player and is not Washington's biggest concern.

But this problem is not peculiar to Obama. It is characteristic of democratic leaders in general when attempting to deal with autocrats. Former British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and French Prime Minister Edouard Daladier took the same approach with Adolf Hitler.

In fact, authoritarian leaders have always had a much wider variety of policy options than the leaders of open societies because they are not constrained by legal, moral or ethical considerations.

What price does an autocrat pay for his unruly behavior? Nothing, in most cases.

In the U.S.-Russian diplomatic battle, Putin will always win a convincing psychological victory over Obama, just like the bully who deliberately steps on a good-natured person's foot on a bus.

The problem is that after stomping on the man's foot, the bully will sit down to drink a bottle of beer and brag to his drinking buddies about how he showed that chump a thing or two, while the decent man will return to his office and work even harder than ever.

The problem is that shale gas produced in the U.S. has already caused world gas prices to drop. What's more, in a few years the U.S. will produce enough shale oil to lower those prices even more and break free from its dependence on imported oil. But until that happens, the Kremlin will have fun bad-mouthing the U.S. and giving a cold shoulder to Obama's top security advisers.

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