

OPINION

FOREIGN POLICY



ADVANTAGE PUTIN

BY ARTHUR B. LAFFER
STAFF COLUMNIST
AND BRIAN CALLE
OPINION EDITOR

Russian President Vladimir Putin really had no choice except to act on annexing Crimea. The reasons go back many years and involve politics, the economy and the fact that many Crimeans identify more with Russia than Ukraine.

America should have been prepared for Russian actions in Crimea, yet, it was not. Those who fail to plan plan to fail.

The incentives for Russia to enter Crimea are obvious.

- First, the Black Sea port city Sevastopol provides Russia with year-round access to the high seas.
- Second, Crimea was transferred from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954 by Communist Party First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev's unilateral decree – no vote.
- Third, Russia has maintained the Sevastopol naval base since the fall of the USSR more than two decades ago.
- Fourth, the Ukrainian Parliament, after long periods of street riots in the capital Kiev, ousted the elected, pro-Russian president of Ukraine and replaced him

Grabbing Crimea made perfect sense from a Russian point of view, not to mention the fact that America could do little to prevent or punish the coup.

with somebody decidedly anti-Russian.

- Fifth, approximately 60 percent of Crimeans are of Russian descent. As a whole, Ukraine's population is 78 percent Ukrainian and 17 percent Russian.
- Sixth, Crimeans identify themselves as Russians rather than Ukrainians.
- Finally, a tremendous amount of Russian natural gas flows to Western Europe via pipelines through Ukraine.

Based on these facts, it should surprise no one that Putin's domestic approval ratings last week – after the annexation – were at their highest level ever, 71.6 percent. President Obama, on the other hand, has approval ratings in the mid-40s.

The so-called Russian invasion of Crimea was a far cry from, say, the United States' invasion of Iraq or Afghanistan. There has been no fighting or military escalation by Russia in Crimea, and the Crimean Parliament asked that Crimea become an equal subject of the Russian Federation. In the March 16 referendum, Russia claims that more than 96 percent of the 83 percent of Crimeans who were eligible

to vote and voted cast their ballots for joining Russia. While this has a strong odor of Chicago elections, it is probably true that most of Crimea would prefer to be back with Russia.

The idea that Russia's actions are illegal makes no sense. It was just as illegal for Crimea to be transferred to Ukraine in 1954 or for the Ukrainian Parliament to oust its pro-Russian, elected president, Viktor Yanukovich, and replace him by appointment with anti-Russian Oleksandr Turchynov.

A Martian looking down at the controversy would be hard-pressed to cede moral or legal advantage to any side.

Now the question is, what will Russia's position be vis-à-vis the rest of Ukraine. Or, stated alternatively, will Russia do something to assure the security of its pipelines traversing Ukraine.

WHAT SHOULD THE UNITED STATES DO?

Russia's interest in seizing Crimea is clearly a much bigger deal for Russia than is the U.S. interest in preventing such action. Still, options are being discussed and some implemented.

So, what should the United States do?

Sanctions: Russia should never be removed from the G-8 group of economic powers, especially not now. The purpose of the G-8 is having an automatic means to discuss critical world issues. So, when such an issue arises, that is not the time to shut down discussions or expel members. President Jimmy Carter's boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics over the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan was not politically savvy. German Chancellor Angela Merkel's recent announcement that there will be no further G-8 meetings until "the political situation changes" is just as goofy.

The idea of sanctions, like the idea of taxes, is a topic perfectly designed to fit the repertoire of Washington politicians. These faux intellectuals don't understand the concept of sanctions, but they can blather on about the idea for hours.

Economic sanctions do not work. We've seen what U.S. sanctions have done in bringing sanity to North Korea, Zimbabwe, Cuba and Iran, or in preventing underage drinking, illegal immigration, speeding on the freeways or the smuggling of illicit drugs into the U.S. – the list goes on and on.

Only somewhat jokingly,

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POLITICS

Pontiff's blueprint for GOP rebranding

BY CARL M. CANNON
STAFF COLUMNIST

President Obama emerged smiling – and unscathed – from his Vatican visit Thursday. Pope Francis steered clear of areas where the two men are not simpatico, notably abortion and U.S. militarism. Likewise, the pope was gracious enough not to ask whether his guest's 2012 conversion on gay

MARK STEYN

... did not file a column this week.

marriage was prompted by election-year expedience.

Instead, the pontiff, who has taken the world by storm, gave Obama a copy of "The Joy of the Gospel," which Francis released in November signaling his commitment to evangelism and an increased focus on the poor. Gift-giving between popes and presidents is a time-honored tradition, and it brought to mind George W. Bush's 2004 visit to Rome.

The story line in the international media before that trip was Pope John Paul II's intention of reminding Bush that the Vatican had opposed the U.S. invasion of Iraq and lamenting the "deplorable events" at Abu Ghraib prison.

The infirm pontiff did, indeed, read his prepared text with those criticisms. But after listening respectfully, Bush presented John Paul with a Presidential Medal of Freedom while praising him as a "son of Poland who became a bishop of Rome and a hero for our time."

The pope beamed in response, and Bush political aide Karl Rove – who dreamed up the presidential medal gambit – came outside afterward and all but jumped in the air and clicked his heels in front of the Swiss Guard.

Today, however, the Grand Old Party has worse problems than in 2004, and outfoxing the press at a photo-op isn't going to get the job done.

Although Republicans believe they are poised to do well in the 2014 mid-term elections, their long-term trends are not encouraging. The party's favorability rating hovers below 40 percent, its activist base is split between feuding social conservatives and economic conservatives (GOP liberals and moderates being in short supply), and no clear Republican presidential contender has emerged.

The party's demographic problems are so stark that it's unclear whether Republicans can attract enough women, Latinos, Asians, African Americans or young people to forge a majority in a national election – something they've accomplished only once in the past six presidential elections. Speak-

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GOVERNMENT

Don't make big-city mayors regional rulers



JOEL KOTKIN
STAFF COLUMNIST

progressives, who historically have embraced an ever-more expansive federal government.

In many ways, this constitutes an extraordinarily positive development. Political decentralization is built into the very framework of American democracy, as Alexis de Tocqueville, among

others, recognized. If Paris dominated France and London dominated England, in America, he noted, "intelligence and power is dispersed abroad."

Yet, there's a problem with how the decentralist argument is taking shape. Increasingly, it is becoming a movement to create ever more powerful regional governments, which tend to be dominated by large cities, their mayors and their power blocs, whether unions, bureaucracies or politically connected developers. The notion of mayors running the world has been endorsed by writers such as Benjamin Barber, and has had the strong backing of Bruce Katz of Brookings, who appears to have lost sight of his long-held faith in

the federal government.

Not surprisingly, Katz and other have found a new way to press their agenda: regional governments as essentially extended cities. Like many progressive decentralists, he likes handing more power to big-city mayors, themselves generally presiding over one-party (Democratic) systems.

This notion of mayors *uber alles* was recently celebrated at an event in Chicago where mayors such as Atlanta's Karim Reed, Eric Garcetti of Los Angeles, New York's Bill de Blasio and Chicago's Rahm Emanuel claimed that big cities were the future and, where, as Reed put

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PAUL BEATY, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, center, speaks during a panel discussion in Chicago this month about issues facing big cities, as Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, right, Atlanta Mayor Kasim Reed, second from left, and New York Mayor Bill De Blasio, left, listen.

CANNON: Francis offers lessons Republicans should emulate

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ing about his party's image problem, Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus says, "We've done a really lousy job of branding and marketing who we are."

No kidding. The perception is that the party is too old, too white, too conservative, too religious, too Southern, too straight, and too obsessed with sexual mores. Since Obama's 2012 re-election, numerous columns, books, academic panels and blue ribbon commissions – Priebus appointed one of his own – have rummaged for ideas on GOP "rebranding." Instead, they should simply emulate Pope Francis.

When he became pope last year, the Roman Catholic Church was also reeling. The dominant story lines were the long-running child sex-abuse scandal and sordid tales of chicanery at the Vatican Bank.

Today, the dominant story is a revitalized church led by a charismatic pope who is bringing lapsed Catholics back into the fold and earning the admiration

of Jews, Protestants, Muslims, even nonbelievers. A recent Gallup Poll shows the pope with a 76 percent favorable rating in the United States – with only 9 percent of respondents unfavorable. No American political figure, not even the extremely popular Michelle Obama, racks up numbers like that. Republicans with presidential ambitions should take heed.

"He has rebranded Catholicism," wrote Jesuit priest Thomas Reese. "Business schools could use him as a case study."

So how did a 77-year-old Argentine priest named Jorge Mario Bergoglio make himself into the second coming of Francis of Assisi and rebrand his venerable denomination in the process? Let's count the ways, and consider how Republicans could follow his lead, starting with materialism.

In the most-recent presidential election, the Republican nominee was perceived as an out-of-touch rich guy. How did he respond? By talking almost exclusively about economics while often reminding voters how wealthy he was. He men-

tioned his wife's two Cadillacs, told a heckler that "corporations are people, my friend," and once said, "I'm not concerned about the very poor. We have a safety net there."

The Vatican is rich, too, but this pope decries the "slave labor" mentality when a garment factory collapse in Bangladesh kills low-wage workers, and says that a culture that throws away so much food is "stealing from the hungry."

To Rush Limbaugh, this smacks of socialism, but Republicans could learn many lessons from Pope Francis. Here are three: political flexibility, public communications and personal humility.

Flexibility: Despite the church's rigid orthodoxy, Francis has jump-started the conversation on a host of issues – without instituting doctrinal changes. For starters, he initiated an inter-church discussion of whether divorced Catholics can receive Holy Communion. "The Eucharist is not a prize for the perfect," he said, "but a powerful medicine for the nourishment of the weak."

He simultaneously underscored the church's opposition to abortion (linking it directly to his concern for the weakest members of society), while downplaying the church's opposition to gay rights. "If a person is gay and seeks God and has goodwill, who am I to judge?" He's made similar gestures toward atheists and Muslims.

Communications: Paul Valley, the pope's best biographer, notes that when asked about gay marriage or divorce – or even legalized abortion – Francis tells interviewers that they are not asking the right question. "Some interviewers will be like a terrier with a bone and stick with it," Valley notes. "But some will say, 'Okay, what is the right question?' and Francis' reply is that the overwhelming message of the Gospel is love and compassion and including people – and that in the past, the Catholic Church has been excluding people."

Humility: Pope Francis eschewed bright colors for white robes, and wears a simple metal cross and tells time with a plastic Swatch. He doesn't take

"selfies," à la Barack Obama, but he does let teenagers he meets take such pictures of them together.

Such symbols are nice, but Francis' answer to a question from Antonio Spadaro, editor of a prominent Jesuit journal, got to the crux of things.

"Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?" he was asked.

"I am a sinner," the pope replied. "This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner."

Republicans could use much more of this. At a lengthy press conference to explain why his minions had trapped innocent motorists for hours on a bridge, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, professed himself "embarrassed and humiliated" by what had happened. But he did so without really taking responsibility.

"I am not a bully," he said. Not hardly "I am a sinner," but it's a start.

Register opinion columnist Carl M. Cannon also is Washington editor of the website RealClearPolitics.

RUSSIA: U.S. too economically weak now to restrain Putin

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we've also seen how the Obama administration's pro-growth economic policies have worked in the United States. The Obama administration doesn't have a clue how to target sanctions to have the desired effect in Russia.

Military Response: There is also virtually nothing the United States can do militarily. For any real military venture, we would need to land forces around the Black Sea to access Crimea. Realistically, we would also need the United Nations' and Ukraine's permission to bring in troops. That is not going to happen. Such a move would drastically over-escalate the situation. And again, just to get a clear picture of how well we execute military operations, look at our level of success in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

Unfortunately, our ability to project military power in far-off places has collapsed over the past 10 years. Just think of the drain of military resources the U.S. has experienced in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Iran, Syria and Egypt, not to mention our continued military involvement in Korea, Japan and Europe. Do the words dissipated and over-extended have any meaning?

And, if our current unpreparedness is not bad enough, just look at what is happening to our defense budget, where the Pentagon is planning significant reductions. Our reputation exceeds our current

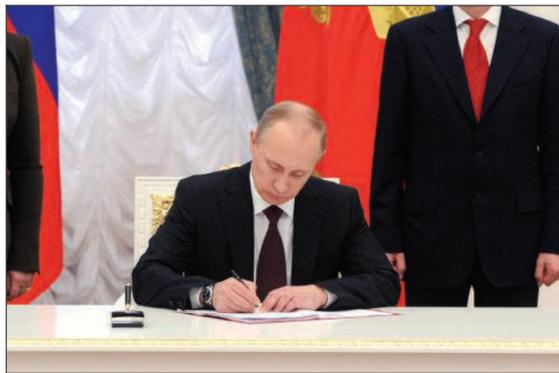
abilities.

The Economy: The United States, plain and simple, is weak and is getting weaker. That doesn't just mean that President Obama has taken a nonaggressive posture on geopolitical relations, but that his policies and those of George W. Bush have greatly damaged U.S. economic standing in the world. Real GDP growth has averaged a little less than 2 percent per annum since 2001, versus an average of 3.3 percent over the entire 20th century. If the United States had continued growing at the long-term average growth rate under Presidents Bush and Obama, the economy would be approximately \$3.3 trillion larger than it is today.

We are economically weak today because of the ill-conceived economic policies instituted over the past seven years. To change course, the U.S. must adopt a flat tax and end the spending policies of redistribution. Then, perhaps, five to seven years from now, we could flex our might.

Today, though, we are like the 98-pound weakling in the Charles Atlas cartoons who has sand kicked in his face by bullies at the beach. We need to go home, stop drinking, stop smoking, stop the pity party, hit the gym hard, and come back to where we can defend ourselves.

In particular, we need to leave behind the politics of redistribution and ex-



MIKHAIL KLIMENTYEV, ZUMAPRESS.COM

Russia's president Vladimir Putin signs a decree March 21 to incorporate Crimea and Sevastopol into the Russian Federation.

change them for policies of growth. You can't make America better off by pulling down her most productive citizens or by indulging her least productive. The American Dream has always been about making the poor rich, not about making the rich poorer. Handouts funded by income confiscation are a recipe for disaster.

Unfortunately, policies of redistribution make everyone poorer. The minimum-wage increase, tax increases on the rich, tax-financed stimulus spending, artificially low interest rates, mortgage debt forgiveness, Obamacare – these are all policies designed almost exclusively to decrease income inequality by shifting resources from higher incomes to lower

incomes. Yet, income inequality has been increasing under President Obama at the same time the U.S. economy has been languishing.

As economists Milton and Rose Friedman put it so elegantly, "A society that puts equality – in the sense of equality of outcome – ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom."

Next week: *The U.S. economy as a restraint on Russian expansion.*

Arthur B. Laffer, a former economic adviser to President Ronald Reagan, founder and chairman of Laffer Associates, an economic research firm and a member of the Register's Editorial Board. Brian Calle is the Register's Opinion editor.

KOTKIN: Plenty of work needed in big U.S. core cities

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it, "the action is."

It's hard to underestimate the hubris of this assessment. Despite the slowing down from the Great Recession, the vast majority of American demographic growth and job growth continues to go either into the suburban rings or to low-density sprawling regions, such as Houston, Phoenix and Dallas-Fort Worth, where urban areas and their peripheries are more similar than different.

U.S. suburbs now account for 2.7 times the population of core cities. High-density migration, much-heralded by the urban decentralizers, remains a distinctly minority phenomena, while the largest out-migration tends to be from big, dense cities and to suburbs, less-dense and smaller cities and towns.

Nor can we see in the mayors some sort of archetype for greater governance. Chicago, under Rahm Emanuel, is hardly an exemplar of efficiency or good fiscal management. The city's credit rating is among the worst of any municipality, while the economy remains "sub-par," as a recent bank analyst report shows. Chicago schools are almost bankrupt, and the city's murder rate is higher than during the Prohibition years.

In fact, the city, whose debt load is now the heaviest of any large American city other than Detroit, has now experienced repeated downgrades, and estimated debt now exceeds, by some estimates, more than \$60,000 per household.

Yet despite this, Emanuel is still hailed, most recently in a Financial Times profile, as "Mayor America" and even touted as a presidential candidate. Emanuel's backers can note that many of these problems stem from the more than two-decade Daley regime. Yet, Emanuel was, and remains, part of the Daley machine, and even got his start as a Daley fundraiser.

To consider him primarily a tough reformer – outside his often foul-mouthed manner – is patently ludicrous.

Much the same can be said about L.A.'s Eric Garcetti, who, although certainly an upgrade from Antonio Villaraigosa, was a member, even president, of the same City Council that has driven the city to the brink of financial ruin.

Much of the problem stems from union power: the city is spending 18 percent of its budget on pensions, three times the level a decade ago. Los Angeles has among the nation's weakest urban economies – 28 percent of residents are considered poor – and its unemployment rate of roughly 10 percent is well above both the county and statewide averages and twice that of San Francisco.

In many ways, Atlanta's Reed is barely qualified to speak for his region, as his city constitutes not even 10 percent of the area's population. Nor is it a particularly successful locale, suffering among the highest crime rates of any big city in the country and, according to one recent study, the most severe inequality of any U.S. core city.

Generally speaking, big-city leaders chant a populist rap, but generally it's the densest urbanized places – San Francisco, Washington D.C., Boston, New York, Miami and, sadly, Los Angeles – that are also the most unequal places.

Perhaps the only real potential reformer in the group is New York City's de Blasio, who took office a few months ago. While de Blasio wants to shake things up, his tendency seems to be making things worse. Certainly his attempt to shut down charter schools, which offer an alternative to traditional public schools, particularly for poorer families, hardly represents a step forward. He may be the people's choice, but it's likely he will serve, first and foremost, public employee interests, who have been his main political

backers.

To a large extent, most mayors have been unable to turn their cities around – except in the eyes of the media. The career of now-Sen. Corey Booker of New Jersey is illustrative; despite fawning coverage of his tenure as Newark's mayor, it has become clear that he brought little change to that beleaguered city, as even the New York Times suggests he turned out "a better marketer than mayor." Under his tenure, the city's image improved, but unemployment and crime rose, along with taxes.

To be sure, granting more power for mayors within their own cities – particularly at the expense of Washington, D.C. – has its merits. Despite their much-ballyhooed resurgence, cities need radical reform to deal with rising inequality, high unemployment and a low-income population that, over the past decade, accounted for some 80 percent of their growth. Rather than try to tell the rest of their regions, and the country, what to do, they should follow the biblical suggestion to "heal thyself."

But none of this suggests we should expand the power of mayors over their regions. Despite claims to the contrary, attempts to consolidate cities, or expand regional government, frequently end up with higher costs than more dispersed arrangements.

Indeed, one Ohio study, by demographer Wendell Cox, found that smaller communities spent roughly one-third to one-half less per capita on governmental services than do their larger counterparts. This is partially an issue of scale. The larger the city, generally speaking, the less influence is exercised by people not connected with the power elites.

Running for office in vast term-limited cities like Los Angeles rarely produces electoral surprises; essentially, candidates need to rely on public employee unions or

crony developers to make it into office. There has been increasingly little political diversity in Los Angeles and most other big cities in recent decades as the middle class has shrunk, the poor have expanded, and a coalition of special interests – gender, racial, labor, environmental and urban density advocates – gain ever more control.

Handing power to the mayors, particularly through regional governments, threatens the very nature of governance throughout regions. It makes sense, for example, to core-city advocates to promote high density throughout the Bay Area by forcing developers to build on high-rise construction. But such attempts are hardly welcomed in many suburbs, such as in Marin County, whose residents like their relatively bucolic lifestyle and prefer not to have it destroyed by designs imposed from San Francisco.

Core cities are critical to the nation, but they are not annotated to be predominant in influence, as the 20th century city has expanded well beyond their boundaries. Instead, core cities should be pushing for the opportunity to craft innovative solutions to meet their pressing problems. They no more need the suburbs to tell them how to be more dispersed than the suburbs need the big cities to instruct them into how to be more urbane.

There are many areas – water, air quality, arterial road infrastructure – that require cooperation along regional lines. But for the most part, the best approach, whenever possible, is to allow localities to control their own fates. It's a system that, for the most part, has worked for America. It's called democracy.

Register opinion columnist Joel Kotkin is R.C. Hobbs Professor of Urban Studies at Chapman University. He is the executive editor of www.newgeography.com.