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# This is the moment to stand up to Putin

by [David Von Drehle](#)

Special counsel Robert S. Mueller III [has indicted](#) a dozen members of the Russian military intelligence branch on charges of hacking American computers, proving that someone in Washington will stand up to Vladimir Putin. Now it's the president's turn.

If there has ever been a moment for President Trump to deploy his arsenal of denigration, this is it. His willingness to let fly with brutal candor is one of the traits his supporters love best. And the impolite thing that needs to be said at the two leaders' impending summit is that Putin is not "a strong leader," as Trump has claimed obsequiously [in the past](#). Putin is the emperor with no clothes, the criminal head of a failing state, the latest in a long train of dismal leaders to darken the tragic history of the Russian people.

No nation in the world has squandered its opportunities as thoroughly as Russia. Two hundred years ago, the [vast Eurasian territory](#) was an eastern counterpart to the fledgling United States in the west. Both were ambitious, continent-spanning lands, endowed with breathtaking potential riches in the form of raw materials and fertile soil. In fact, experts [estimate](#) that 30 percent of all natural resources in the world are bestowed by providence on, in and under Russian earth.

Like the United States, Russia was a land of geniuses; for our Melville, Russia had its Tolstoy; before our Gershwin came Russia's Tchaikovsky; in earth science, our [Louis Agassiz](#) had an equal in Russia's [Vladimir Vernadsky](#). And, like America, Russia could, if it wished, attract human capital from uneasy lands all around it. Instead, it drove people away.

The divergent paths of the two nations over those two centuries could not be more shocking. The United States found its destiny as the wealthiest and most influential nation in the world, with a gross domestic product that [will soon be](#) \$20 trillion per year. Russia, by contrast, is stalled, its population shrinking and its economy [stagnant](#). Despite its lion's share of the planet's resources, Russia's GDP is estimated to be less than \$1.5 trillion. Three U.S. states — California, Texas and New York — each generate more economic output than the entire Russian nation.

The misrule of Russia has taken many forms. The despotism of the last czars drove millions of the nation's most creative and enterprising families to flee. (Many of them fled to America, where they were free to dream and build.) The totalitarianism of the Soviet communists choked off enterprise and innovation. The incompetence and corruption of post-Soviet leadership set the stage for Putin's surge to power.

But power over what? Much has been made of Putin's professed desire to [restore Russian greatness](#) — and judging from his soaring poll numbers, he seems to have revived an echo of the stubborn capacity for patriotic suffering that ground down the armies of Napoleon and Hitler. But the actual purpose of his nationalistic rhetoric and low-risk adventurism is to distract the Russian people while he loots what is left of their patrimony. Ownership of major Russian enterprises is now tightly in the grip of Putin cronies who, rather than investing in their nation's development, stash their money outside the country (some of it in [Trump-branded](#) luxury condominiums). At this point, the value of offshore assets owned by Russian billionaires, including Putin himself, "is comparable in magnitude to total household financial assets held in Russia," [according to](#) the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Put another way: All the wealth of all the Russians apart from the Putin mafia barely equals the amount that Russia's leaders have spirited out of the country. And the giant sucking sound will continue as long as Putin rules.

Russians have borne the weight of failed leadership for so long that it's hard to blame them for their stooped backs and acquiescence. Trump should stand up for them, though. If he cooperates in Putin's charade by treating the Russian president as an important world leader — not just an annoying one — Trump will be complicit in the exploitation of the Russian people. If, on the other hand, Trump were to call out Putin for the second-rater that he is, Russians might begin to wake up, look around and notice that they've been led down yet another dead end.

The problem of Putin is the problem of Kim Jong Un, but on a larger scale. Neither one would merit much attention from U.S. presidents but for the menace of their nuclear warheads.

However, menace is not the same as strength. Starting with George W. Bush peering into Putin's soul, through Barack Obama's Russia "[reset](#)," to Donald Trump's Twitter feed, American presidents have flattered Putin without success. From Syria to Crimea to Ukraine, flattery has egged him on. It's time to call weakness by its name.

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