

## Overriding Democracy: American Intervention in Yeltsin's 1996 Reelection Campaign

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The United States had many reasons to want to intervene in the 1996 Russian presidential election. Since before the start of the Cold War, the U.S. had essentially operated on an "open door" grand strategy, as described by scholar Christopher Layne: the U.S. sought to ensure its own domestic stability and prosperity by keeping other nations open to favorable trade and by spreading democracy and liberalism as norms.<sup>1</sup> In doing so it became, after 1991, the sole international hegemon. The policy remained in place after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, as evident in the leaked draft of the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG), which affirmed that a key American priority was that it "prevent the reemergence of a new rival either on the territory of the former Soviet Union or elsewhere, that poses a threat on the order of that posed formerly by the Soviet Union."<sup>2</sup> Before officials modified it following public scrutiny, the draft also included the objective of preventing former Soviet states from again consolidating the power necessary to challenge the U.S. on a global level by "support[ing] ... Russia and Ukraine in their efforts to become peaceful democracies with market-based economies."<sup>3</sup> In short, American policymakers had ample reason to think that Boris Yeltsin was the candidate best aligned with their grand strategy and defensive plans for the region, as they perceived him to be the most amenable, among the options in 1996, to democratization and marketization, and unlikely to challenge U.S. hegemony.

There are two perspectives on the American practice, in international relations, of what is often called "democracy promotion." The traditional view holds that the United States has a right, or even a duty, to reach into other countries' politics to promote fair, free democratic processes. Sometimes, this means supporting those who seek to topple authoritarian governments. It can also be as limited as sending election monitors to oversee and report on foreign elections, or the use of government organizations, like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), to publish supposedly unbiased news for foreign audiences and support liberal NGOs abroad. A more cynical view of democracy

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> Dale A. Vesser, "FY 94-98 Defense Planning Guidance Sections for Comment," February 18, 1992, National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., [https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb245/doc03\\_extract\\_nytedit.pdf](https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb245/doc03_extract_nytedit.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Vesser, 16.

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promotion holds, to the contrary, that U.S. officials use platitudes – such as furthering human rights and advancing liberty – to mask what amounts to self-interested political manipulation overseas.<sup>4</sup> President William Clinton, in the run-up to the 1996 Russian presidential election, claimed that the United States supported no particular candidate, although it was clear that Clinton and his administration considered it imperative that Boris Yeltsin, the incumbent, defeat his communist opponent Gennady Zyuganov.<sup>5</sup> In the perspective of the Clinton administration, America's foreign policy objectives were better served by supporting Yeltsin, making the case for self-interest and therefore the cynical view of democracy promotion. With additional evidence, initial concerns about the legitimacy of Yeltsin's reelection have been largely affirmed. The United States intervened in the democratic process far beyond what would be reasonable were the goal merely to ensure a legitimate election. Indeed, there was a concerted effort, by the administration and private U.S. citizens working adjacent to the U.S. government, as well as by international institutions including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to help Boris Yeltsin win another term in office, resulting in an astonishing comeback for a politician whose regime was on the brink of failure.

To understand America's role in the 1996 election, it is important to first review Russia's political and economic background in the years preceding the election and U.S. foreign policy during this period. After Yeltsin's 1981 national political launch, upon election to the Central Committee, an important government organ in the Soviet Union, he became a proponent of the Communist Party's liberal faction. In 1987, he resigned in protest following a series of political disputes with the party's conservatives.<sup>6</sup> These events led U.S. officials to believe that Yeltsin was truly a democratic reformer, although, as happened here, a political actor's role in the opposition does not always predict what that individual will do once in power. Around the same time, there were increasing signs that the Soviet economy was facing a large decline. The crisis became especially severe in the country's final years.<sup>7</sup> Although Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union's last leader, enacted substantial political reforms – holding the first free elections in Soviet history and

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<sup>4</sup> Lincoln Mitchell, *The Democracy Promotion Paradox* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Dmitry Radyshesky, "The CIA on Russian Elections," *Moscow News* (Moscow, Russia), May 23, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia: From Tsarism to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 452–453.

<sup>7</sup> Service, 467–470.

relaxing media censorship – attempts to reorganize the economy largely failed.<sup>8</sup> The coming economic contraction continued almost unabated until 1999.

In the midst of a crisis, Yeltsin was elected president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, a political subunit of the Soviet Union, in June 1991. Zyuganov, Yeltsin's main challenger in 1996, was, in the meantime, aligned with communist reactionaries who opposed both Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Additionally, Zyuganov co-founded the reinstated Communist Party in post-Soviet Russia, as the party was, before November 1992, outlawed by Yeltsin.<sup>9</sup> Although Yeltsin appeared to be, by mid-1991, the successor to power in what would soon become an independent Russia, the first Bush administration maintained official support for Gorbachev until the Soviet Union's collapse at the end of the year.<sup>10</sup> While some in the CIA advocated that the administration change its course to support Yeltsin and an earlier breakup of the U.S.S.R., there would be no such gesture until the state formally dissolved.<sup>11</sup> The head of a new Russia, Yeltsin was most popular in the first months of 1992, before the "shock therapy" of advisers like Yegor Gaidar set in and the standard of living plummeted further.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, Yeltsin did not call for fresh elections in 1992; he wanted to start economic restructuring right away. His reforms, which included an abrupt rollback of price controls and the privatization of formerly state-owned properties, were widely perceived by Russians as benefiting a small, emerging elite later known as the oligarchs.<sup>13</sup> His reputation already in decline, Yeltsin's coalition lost many seats to the communists in the 1995 legislative elections, a sign he would struggle to keep the presidency a year later.

Looking on from a position of newfound global hegemony, the United States considered its primary security objective, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to be "the transformation of Russia internally and the integration of Russia externally into the West."<sup>14</sup> The Clinton administration, more so than the first Bush administration, considered

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<sup>8</sup> Service., 542.

<sup>9</sup> Esther B. Fein, "Yeltsin Bans Communist Groups in Government," *New York Times*, July 21, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), 348.

<sup>11</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 348.

<sup>12</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 222–225.

<sup>13</sup> Service, *A History of Modern Russia*, 532.

<sup>14</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 330.

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democracy promotion in Russia to be vital to these objectives, or at least it claimed that democratization was necessary.<sup>15</sup> In reality, Yeltsin frequently undermined legitimate democracy promotion in Russia, with tacit or outright approval from the U.S., as he became increasingly autocratic in the face of political opposition. In 1993, for example, Yeltsin attacked the parliament building with tanks following a political showdown with legislators and, upon subduing his opponents, changed the constitution to substantially increase executive power.<sup>16</sup> As a priority of the Clinton administration, democratization in Russia was, in general, second to marketization, the shifting of the Russian economy away from state control. Sending a series of advisers, the U.S. was, to disastrous effect, intimately involved in the marketization of the Russian economy, and dedicated far more resources to transform the Russian economy than to legitimate democratization.<sup>17</sup>

The United States felt it necessary to intervene because many predicted that Zyuganov would win the election, as Yeltsin had approval ratings in the single digits in 1995.<sup>18</sup> Zyuganov threatened to destabilize the region and undo what limited progress had been made in reforming Russia in the West's image. Specifically, he intended to restrict trade, reverse privatization, and counterbalance the U.S. where plausible in international affairs. Even if Russia was, in 1996, a shadow of its former self, U.S. officials sensed that, as the DPG draft predicted, a future threat from the former Soviet bloc could arise if a leader like Zyuganov came to power.

There were other reasons, some far less strategic, as to why U.S. policymakers wanted Yeltsin in power over Zyuganov and felt the need to support him to that end. The first was related to the close partnership, and seemingly genuine friendship, between Clinton and Yeltsin as presidents. America's Russia policy was directed, above all else, by the executive during this period – lobbyists, business interests, and Congress all took the backseat compared to Clinton.<sup>19</sup> This trend continued throughout the Clinton administration, although one notable exception was arms dealers' acute interest in lobbying for the expansion of NATO

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<sup>15</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul., 347–350.

<sup>16</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, 127.

<sup>17</sup> Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 246–262," for a detailed discussion of privatization efforts in Russia guided by Western advisors.

<sup>18</sup> Sergei Roy, "Adjusting to Suicide: 1996 Presidential Election Forecasting in Russia," *Moscow News* (Moscow, Russia), March 28, 1996; Erik DePoy, "Boris Yeltsin and the 1996 Russian Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1996): 1148.

<sup>19</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 330.

(toward the Russian border) during the 1990s.<sup>20</sup> In general, however, America's Russia policy was conducted, to a fault, on a personal basis between Yeltsin and Clinton, causing the administration to be too lenient with Yeltsin. Despite criticism from American media outlets and political accusations, including from members of Congress, that he favored Russia's interests above those of the US, Clinton continued to be an advocate for his sometimes embarrassing colleague in the Kremlin.<sup>21</sup>

Accusations that the administration favored Russia's interests too highly came about when a leaked memorandum surfaced claiming that, essentially, Yeltsin and Clinton had agreed not to do anything to hurt each other's campaigns before their elections, both held in 1996, were over.<sup>22</sup> It included the allegation that Clinton personally persuaded Yeltsin to ease the import of American poultry into Russia, apparently an important electoral issue for him, since "40 percent of U.S. poultry is produced in Arkansas."<sup>23</sup> Russian soon lifted the ban on importing American chicken, but the critical information in the conversation between the two presidents was that they agreed to avoid anything that might damage their respective reputations domestically until after the campaigns were over, and that their actions towards each other would, they planned, generate only positive assessments of them in their respective countries.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, this revelation troubled Republicans in Congress – especially Senator John McCain – who were already critical of Clinton's hesitation to further expand NATO, an issue Yeltsin thought would imperil him politically. They viewed the poultry negotiation as petty in the face of larger issues on which, they stated, Clinton should have more urgently pressed Yeltsin.

Another interaction, this time a 1995 meeting between Yeltsin and Clinton, provides additional evidence that the U.S. intended to interfere in the 1996 election. Together to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Germany's surrender to the Allies in World War II, Yeltsin and Clinton

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<sup>20</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye, "Arms Contractors Spend to Promote an Expanded NATO," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Mar. 30, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> "Mr. Clinton and Mr. Yeltsin," *New York Times*, April 18, 1996; "Foreign Relations Authorization Act, Fiscal Years 1996 and 1997 – Conference Report," March 28, 1996, Congressional Record, Proceedings and Debates of the U.S. Congress, Washington, D.C., <https://www.congress.gov/congressional-record/1996/03/28/senate-section/article/S3105-1>.

<sup>22</sup> Foreign Relations Authorization Act, 3108–3110.

<sup>23</sup> John F. Harris, "White House Asks for Probe in Leak of Clinton-Yeltsin Talk Memo," *Washington Post*, March 28, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> "Memorandum of Conversation: Meeting with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia," March 13, 1996, Declassified Documents Concerning Russia, *Clinton Digital Library*, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57241>.

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made remarks about denuclearization and their elections.<sup>25</sup> On the issue of expanding NATO, Clinton explained that the American plan was to first conduct a study regarding expansion and to review those results in the “first half of 1996.” Yeltsin, presumably worried that NATO would again expand towards Russia before June – when the first round of elections were to take place – asked when exactly this would happen.<sup>26</sup> Clinton responded that he was “mindful of the political pressures on [him].” Yeltsin, almost begging Clinton to delay the expansion, retorted: “Bill ... next year [there are] the presidential [elections]. One false move now could ruin everything. So please postpone this issue ... at least for the next few years until you and I get through our elections.” Yeltsin also said, referencing his declining popularity, “I’ve got to tell you, my position heading into the 1996 elections is not exactly brilliant ... yesterday [when Clinton attended Moscow’s Victory Day parade] boosted my standing, and you helped me in that.” Finally, Clinton responded, in what is a clear indication of their close political relationship: “you know how I’ve tried to help you, Boris ... Even yesterday, when I was getting ready to speak at the War Memorial, I was thinking: what words can I say that will help President Yeltsin?” Afterwards, Clinton noted that he, too, had a political challenge in the election year – he did not want Republicans to think he was “capitulat[ing]” to Russia, to which Yeltsin replied that the expansion *must* be held back. The two agreed to adhere to the status quo, but Clinton offered no guarantee that the expansion would be delayed until after Yeltsin’s election (although that is, in fact, what took place, as new states were admitted only in 1999).<sup>27</sup>

When Yeltsin publicly announced that he would run for reelection, Clinton reaffirmed his commitment to their relationship in a confidential telephone conversation. He said that in the election year, the two should “call and talk more often ... to keep up our partnership and friendship,” and Yeltsin agreed, suggesting Clinton could share “the experience of our election campaigns.” Yeltsin later asked Clinton to use his influence at the IMF to get a planned loan of \$9 billion increased to

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<sup>25</sup> “Summary Report on One-On-One Meeting Between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin,” May 10, 1995, National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/4950563/Document-04-Summary-report-on-the-one-on-one.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> There were two rounds in the 1996 Russian presidential election since no candidate received a majority in the first round. The second was a runoff between Yeltsin and Zyuganov held in July of that year.

<sup>27</sup> “Summary Report on One-On-One Meeting Between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin,” 8–10.

\$13 billion “to deal with social problems in this very important pre-election situation.”<sup>28</sup> Undoubtedly, this was a plea for help in the election, thinly veiled in humanitarian terms by Yeltsin, because, as the *New York Times* wrote, once the loan of \$10.2 billion was approved, “Yeltsin announced that some of the cash would be used to help with huge unpaid wage bills the Government owed workers, one of the Russian leader's most sensitive political problems.”<sup>29</sup> The institution defended its actions against critics who thought the loan was an intrusion into Russia's election. It claimed that Russia met expectations to lower inflation and its budget deficit, and that the decision was motivated not by support for Yeltsin, but by optimism about the economic direction of the country.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, academic scrutiny by some has brought doubt to the claims given the clear influence the U.S. exacted in securing the loans.<sup>31</sup>

Although the above conversations show that Clinton was often the one helping Yeltsin, there is evidence that the assistance was occasionally mutual. Yeltsin did not need to explicitly state that he wanted to ensure Clinton's reelection – as the American president could largely do that on his own – but the perception that Yeltsin was “our man in Moscow” in many ways rang true, making Clinton's foreign policy résumé, especially his handling of post-Soviet issues, more impressive.<sup>32</sup> He depended on Yeltsin's cooperation to manage the nuclear weapons of both Russia and of other former Soviet states, like Ukraine and Kazakhstan. There was also a feeling, especially within the American political establishment, that Russia was ours to lose in the same way that the U.S. – and President Harry Truman specifically – was said to have lost China when the communists came to power there, in 1949.<sup>33</sup> President Clinton, therefore, had to politically balance his Russia policy, as he did not want to be blamed should the communists win, but he also did not

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<sup>28</sup> “Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: The President's Discussion with President Yeltsin on the Russian Election, Bilateral Relations, START II Ratification, and NATO,” February 21, 1996, National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, D.C., <https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/4950565/Document-06-Memorandum-of-Telephone-Conversation.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Richard W. Stevenson, “Did Yeltsin Get a Sweetheart Deal on I.M.F. Loans?” *New York Times*, March 11, 1996.

<sup>30</sup> Stevenson.

<sup>31</sup> Elmira A. Makova, “Role of the World Bank and IMF in Issuing Loans to Russia: Responsibility, Tricks, Corruption, Mafia, and Important Use of Legal Enforcement” (master's thesis, University of Georgia School of Law, 2005), 38–39.

<sup>32</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 121.

<sup>33</sup> Aleksei Pushkov, “Christopher vs. Kohl,” *Moscow News* (Moscow, Russia), Mar. 28, 1996.

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want to be seen as putting Russian interests above those of America in the post-Soviet space.

Clearly, the Clinton administration wanted Yeltsin to continue as president, but what exactly did the United States and other actors do to help him win? Admittedly it is difficult to know definitively what took place, given that the election is still in the recent past. Often, the most damning evidence is that which is longest kept secret in international relations. As journalist Sean Guillory remarked, “one can only guess what the two nations’ archival records would reveal.”<sup>34</sup> Fortunately, however, U.S. officials were flagrant in some of the ways they interfered in the election. As noted, there was the deal, or pact, made by Yeltsin and Clinton, although similar bargaining in international politics is nothing out of the ordinary per se. There is also evidence, in Clinton’s discussions with Yeltsin and other sources, that U.S. officials manipulated the IMF to give Russia a loan right before the election, to infuse Yeltsin’s campaign and resolve social ailments. This, as mentioned, was immensely advantageous to Yeltsin, as many of the unpaid government workers probably would have voted for Zyuganov were their wages never paid by the government before the vote. Additionally, although these claims are more tenuous than those already presented, reporting by *Time* magazine shortly after the election identified another source of potential U.S. interference.



On July 15, 1996, *Time* printed what has become an infamous cover for their issue devoted to “The Secret Story of How American Advisers Helped Yeltsin Win.” It included a portrait of Yeltsin holding an

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<sup>34</sup> Sean Guillory, “Dermokratiya, USA,” *Jacobin Magazine* (New York, NY), Mar. 13, 2017.



American flag with the caption: "Yanks to the Rescue."<sup>35</sup> Their report claimed that, "for four months, a group of American political consultants clandestinely participated in guiding Yeltsin's campaign ... 'help[ing] Yeltsin achieve the victory that will keep reform in Russia alive.'"<sup>36</sup> One of these advisers, it was reported, worked for Clinton's campaign when he ran to be elected governor, and the cohort used this connection "on [a] few occasions." The article also stated that the Americans brought "Western campaigning" techniques to Yeltsin's team: they employed careful polling, "sophisticated ... message development," and high levels of political expenditure.<sup>37</sup> They reportedly stayed in a hotel only open to guests of the president, were driven by a "former KGB agent," and were told, by Russian officials, that they "should leave the hotel only infrequently."<sup>38</sup> Noting that Yeltsin himself had few redeeming qualities, they focused on vilifying the communist in the race.

A critical response to *Time's* reporting was published soon after, however, which accused the American consultants of upselling their role in the reelection for personal publicity. It also argued that Yeltsin's previous advisers knew most of what the Americans claimed to have contributed to the campaign.<sup>39</sup> However, parts of this report are, as well, inherently unreliable because the "Russian campaign aides" cited had just as much reason as the American advisers to lie about what the nature of the arrangement was, and exactly how much help the Americans gave Yeltsin.<sup>40</sup> *Time's* story seems more credible because there was no dispute that the Americans were covertly working for the campaign, hiding their activity for fear that the communists would object to the foreign influence, and it is unreasonable that highly paid aides (each advisor received \$250,000 according to *Time*) would be brought from overseas if they had nothing to add to Yeltsin's campaign.<sup>41</sup> Because these are private individuals, the negative implications of their role vis-à-vis American foreign policy are lessened, although there may have been a greater, undisclosed connection between the Clinton administration and the advisers, which exceeded what they disclosed in the article.

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Kramer, "Rescuing Boris: The Secret Story of How Four U.S. Advisers Used Polls, Focus Groups, Negative Ads and All the Other Techniques of American Campaigning to Help Boris Yeltsin Win," *Time*, July 15, 1996.

<sup>36</sup> Kramer, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Kramer, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Kramer, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Alessandra Stanley, "Moscow Journal; The Americans Who Saved Yeltsin (Or Did They?)," *New York Times*, July 9, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> Stanley, "Moscow Journal."

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Felkay, *Yeltsin's Russia and the West* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Group), 140-141; Kramer, "Rescuing Boris," 30

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In addition to targeted instances of interference surrounding the 1996 election, the U.S. also contributed sums of money, especially in the first half of the decade, to general democracy promotion in Russia by sponsoring organizations and publications. In fiscal year 1994, the overall U.S. “budget for Russia” was \$1.3 billion, although that figure dropped to \$341 million in 1995 and to about \$168 million in 1996.<sup>42</sup> Of that, millions were apportioned specifically to democracy promotion each year going back to 1990.<sup>43</sup> The purpose of this assistance was, a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report stated, to transform Russia into a democratic, free-market state.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, essentially all the assistance was funneled toward pro-reform – and typically pro-U.S. – individuals and organizations. For example, the United States spent almost \$1 million between 1990 and 1992 “to help the anti-Communist Democratic Russia Movement establish a printing facility and disseminate literature.”<sup>45</sup> It requires no stretch of the imagination to conclude that these organizations, the beneficiaries of U.S. aid, would not support Zyuganov’s Communist Party in 1996. While these actions, which included support for reformist unions, media, parties, and NGOs, did not entail manufacturing a base of support for Yeltsin in Russia per se, they definitely inflated Yeltsin’s 1996 coalition artificially.<sup>46</sup>

What the U.S. did not do in the leadup to the 1996 election is also notable. Given that America’s priorities in Russia were the promotion of democracy and the establishment of a market economy, there were, upon closer scrutiny, numerous failures of the Clinton administration’s Russia policy. The Speaker’s Advisory Group on Russia thoroughly outlined these failures in their report.<sup>47</sup> It claimed that the administration “virtually guaranteed that the billions of dollars in lending and aid ... would be wasted by allowing its use ... in the Russian central government’s operating budget ... exposing these funds to theft and

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<sup>42</sup> Curt Tarnoff, “Russia and U.S. Foreign Assistance: 1992–1996,” Mar. 20, 1996, Congressional Research Service, Washington, D.C., <https://file.wikileaks.org/file/crs/96-261.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> “Promoting Democracy: Progress Report on U.S. Democratic Development Assistance to Russia,” February 1996, United States General Accounting Office, Washington, D.C., <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-96-40/pdf/GAOREPORTS-NSIAD-96-40.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup> Tarnoff, “Russia and U.S. Foreign Assistance,” 1–3.

<sup>45</sup> “Promoting Democracy,” 37.

<sup>46</sup> Tarnoff, “Russia and U.S. Foreign Assistance,” 19–22.

<sup>47</sup> “Russia’s Road to Corruption: How the Clinton Administration Exported Government Instead of Free Enterprise and Failed the Russian People,” September 2000, Speaker’s Advisory Group on Russia, United States House of Representatives 106th Congress, Washington, D.C., [https://fas.org/irp/congress/2000\\_rpt/russias-road.pdf](https://fas.org/irp/congress/2000_rpt/russias-road.pdf).

fraud.”<sup>48</sup> The United States, it stated, also should have done more to prevent the state monopolies of the former Soviet Union from being corruptly turned into the private monopolies of the oligarchs, although it did not bemoan the selling, though it was far less widespread, of state resources to foreign investors at discounted rates.<sup>49</sup> This is important to the election, as the deal with the oligarchs was another factor in Yeltsin winning in 1996. He sold them state assets for a drastically reduced rate and seldom prosecuted them while they funded his campaign and helped push the media toward their overwhelmingly positive coverage of Yeltsin.<sup>50</sup>

Additionally, the group’s report criticized the Clinton administration for having had too close a relationship with Yeltsin and his cronies. Reportedly, the administration, because it was too focused on Yeltsin as a leader, failed to acknowledge the potential of parliament or opposition figures in governing Russia. This dynamic caused policy to be exceedingly lenient on some issues, like America’s response to the war in Chechnya, as criticizing Yeltsin was viewed as undermining Russia as a whole.<sup>51</sup> Confirming other sources above, the report claimed that the IMF both prolonged this war and helped Yeltsin win the election: “by pressuring the IMF to grant \$10.2 billion in credits to Russia in February 1996, the administration effectively used the ...[IMF]... to subsidize not only Boris Yeltsin's reelection campaign, but also the Kremlin's war effort in Chechnya.”<sup>52</sup>

Illustrating his commitment to Yeltsin before the election, Clinton, in talking about the war in Chechnya, went so far as to compare Yeltsin to Abraham Lincoln. He said, “I would remind you that we once had a Civil War ... over the proposition that Abraham Lincoln gave his life for, that no State had a right to withdraw from our Union.”<sup>53</sup> This was a double standard, as U.S. policy in similar situations around the world included humanitarian intervention or at least condemnation of the aggressor nation’s actions. But just as Clinton said he would do before the election, he publicly embraced a pro-Russia position to ease the political pressure

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<sup>48</sup> Russia’s Road to Corruption, 90.

<sup>49</sup> Russia’s Road to Corruption, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Service, *A History of Modern Russia*, 532.

<sup>51</sup> “Russia’s Road to Corruption,” 10.

<sup>52</sup> “Russia’s Road to Corruption, 79.

<sup>53</sup> “The President’s News Conference with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia in Moscow,” April 21, 1996, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-with-president-boris-yeltsin-russia-moscow-1>.

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on his friend Boris. The administration was aware of the atrocities taking place in Chechnya but largely ignored them before the election.<sup>54</sup>

In the years before his reelection, U.S. policymakers inflated Yeltsin's image every chance they had. By stalling the expansion of NATO, by having the two presidents appear together on numerous occasions, and by giving Yeltsin the funds he needed to solve a pressing political issue of unpaid wages to government workers, the United States helped Yeltsin hold his regime together and win reelection. American officials, it should be added, loyally supported Yeltsin despite his incessant unstatesmanlike antics. In 1995, for example, Yeltsin eluded the Secret Service while in Washington, D.C., and left his hotel room reportedly to find a pizza while drunk and largely disrobed. Thankfully for those involved, the incident was not disclosed until 2009.<sup>55</sup> There were many other cases, however, which were widely known and excused as quirks by those in the administration. These events, including Yeltsin's alcoholism which led to mental impairment and failing health, speak to the cynicism of U.S. officials in supporting him in 1996. Yeltsin was known to be corrupt, incompetent, and widely unpopular both to the administration and within the country he headed. Of course, this kind of financial and administrative irresponsibility cannot last forever, and the bill would come due in 1998, when the economy spectacularly crashed, showing the failure of Yeltsin's policies and the fragility of Russia. By then, however, Yeltsin had already helped the U.S. avoid a communist rising to power, and it was time for Yeltsin to start the hunt for his successor; he chose Vladimir Putin, a man few at the time could predict would remain in power, as nominal or official executive, to this day.

In telling the story of Yeltsin's reelection, it is important to include the caveat that Yeltsin, too, engaged in a campaign of unethical behavior to save his presidency in 1996. This information does not diminish America's role, as it was certainly influential in its own right, but it complicates the decisiveness of it, as Yeltsin probably needed *both* his own efforts and those of the West to succeed. As previously mentioned, he allied with the oligarchs to fund his campaign far above that of any rival, and above what was permitted by the law despite the state having weak regulations on the issue to begin with.<sup>56</sup> There was also, according

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<sup>54</sup> Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 140-142.

<sup>55</sup> Taylor Branch, "Yeltsin and the Gingrich Revolution," in *The Clinton Tapes: Wrestling History with the President*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009).

<sup>56</sup> "Russia Presidential Election Observation Report," November 20, 1996, International Republican Institute, Washington, D.C., [http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/fields/field\\_files\\_attached/resource/russias\\_1996\\_presidential\\_election.pdf](http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/fields/field_files_attached/resource/russias_1996_presidential_election.pdf).

to an observation report by the International Republican Institute (IRI), a nearly universal media bias, within Russia, in favor of Yeltsin during both rounds of the election, but especially in the runoff where Yeltsin faced Zyuganov. This was, the report argues, largely because the state still controlled most domestic media organizations, but also because the press had an interest in seeing a “reformer” stay in power who they thought would allow the media greater freedom than Zyuganov were he elected.<sup>57</sup> Undoubtedly, the media’s barrage against Zyuganov – which included imagery of him embodying Stalinism, bread lines, and the possible breakout of war with the West – played a role in Yeltsin’s stunning comeback.

Although IRI’s report claimed there was no overt election fraud, it only monitored a handful of cities, and there were reports, from the periphery, of tampering with the results. Outside the monitored cities, voting in Dagestan, Tatarstan, and Bashkortostan had statistical irregularities favoring Yeltsin.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, Dmitry Medvedev, former President (2008–2012) and Prime Minister of Russia, was said to have told members of parliament that “there is hardly any doubt who won [that race]. It was not Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin,” although once reports of his comments surfaced, those around him contradicted them immediately.<sup>59</sup> It is impossible to know whether Medvedev actually believes that the election was fraudulent, and there is reason to doubt the story because the opposition party’s leader was the only source.<sup>60</sup> Nevertheless, the government had ample reason to contradict these claims, since Putin and Medvedev’s legitimacy comes partially from Yeltsin’s reelection success, as the former was catapulted into office by Yeltsin in 1999.

It is clear that the United States, to a substantial degree, intervened in the 1996 Russian presidential election. Certainly, this was not the first time that the United States intervened in a foreign election. Such interference was, in 1996, nothing new for the U.S. – the practice has been widespread since the end of the Second World War. According to Dov Levin, one of the leading specialists in electoral intervention, there have been, by the U.S. and the U.S.S.R./Russia alone, 117 counts of electoral interference between 1946 and 2000, not including coups or military interventions. Of these, 69% were the work of the U.S., while the

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<sup>57</sup> Russia Presidential Election Observation Report, 20–23.

<sup>58</sup> Steven M. Fish, *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 33; Peter Ordeshook and Misha Myagkov, “Russian Elections: An Oxymoron of Democracy,” *Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project* (2008): 1–7.

<sup>59</sup> Sean Guillory, “Dermokratiya, USA.”

<sup>60</sup> Simon Shuster, “Rewriting Russian History: Did Boris Yeltsin Steal the 1996 Presidential Election?” *Time*, February 24, 2012.

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U.S.S.R./Russia intervened in the remaining 31%.<sup>61</sup> Two early cases happened around the start of the Cold War, in France and Italy. There, the U.S. tied post-war reconstruction aid to the condition that the communists stay out of power.<sup>62</sup> In Italy, in 1948, the U.S. needed a new organization to facilitate interference, so officials founded the CIA to covertly ensure that the communists lost – it published materials and coordinated with the Sicilian Mafia and the Catholic Church, among other efforts, to stop the communists.<sup>63</sup> There, like in Russia, the United States influenced politics with publications and funding for political activity. Early victories in Italy and France spurred the U.S. to continue “democracy promotion” and interference throughout the Cold War, although the NED and similar organizations would come to dominate interventions where once U.S. officials utilized the CIA.<sup>64</sup>

Despite their similarities, it should be noted that the 1996 case of electoral interference in Russia was far less overt than those undertaken in Italy and France. Nevertheless, in 1996, the U.S. did not have the supposed justification for its meddling, which it had during the Cold War. In Italy and France, the U.S. could excuse its hand in Western European politics by claiming that the Soviet Union was, too, interfering, and that the U.S. simply balanced the scales. This was not so in Yeltsin’s reelection, as there was no third party – a great power assisting Zyuganov – to balance against. Instead, the administration justified its overwhelming preference for Yeltsin as support for the only reformer and democrat in the race, although, as the evidence indicates, it overrode democracy to do so, as the Russian electorate was by then tired of reform which consisted of “too much shock, not enough therapy.”<sup>65</sup>

While American officials insisted that the U.S. mission in post-Soviet Russia was to promote democracy and market reform, they backed one candidate – arguably pushing him over the line to victory – in a plainly undemocratic fashion in 1996. Despite extensive rhetoric to the contrary by Clinton and other U.S. officials, Yeltsin was a failed free-market reformer, embroiled in corruption, who, when the parliament would not support him, attacked the legislature with tanks. U.S. policymakers and members of the intelligence community often justify

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<sup>61</sup> Dov H. Levin, “Partisan Electoral Interventions by the Great Powers: Introducing the PEIG Dataset,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 36, no. 1 (2019): 94.

<sup>62</sup> Layne, *Peace of Illusions*, 78.

<sup>63</sup> Sarah-Jane Corke, *US Covert Operations and Cold War Strategy: Truman, Secret Warfare, and the CIA, 1945-53* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 45–63.

<sup>64</sup> William I. Robinson, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 85–89.

<sup>65</sup> Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, 247.

electoral interference (but only when carried out by the United States), including in Yeltsin's reelection, as necessary to the establishment of democracy overseas.<sup>66</sup> Their argument in this case, in terms of the Russian presidential election, was that U.S. efforts to undermine Zyuganov were in Russia's best interests. Such an argument is dubious given the depressed standard of living in Russia during Yeltsin's time in office, including in his second term.

There is no way to know whether Zyuganov would have, if elected to the presidency, driven the country further into economic ruin. Many of his party's policies seemed reasonable, as limiting trade could have fostered the growth of domestic industry and reversing parts of privatization could have restrained the oligarchs' domination.<sup>67</sup> But he was threatening to U.S. interests and, therefore, could not be allowed to hold power. What is known, however, is that perceptions of American interference and disregard for conditions in Russia during the 1990s drastically changed attitudes toward the U.S. in Russia. According to polling, "70% of Russians [before 2000] held a favorable view of the United States; only 37% hold such views today ... [and] a staggering 85% [after 2000] believed that the United States sought world domination."<sup>68</sup> Such interference can therefore have unexpected consequences – only a few years after Yeltsin's victory, power changed hands and the new leadership proved to be far less favorable to America's interests in the region. Since then, Russia has continually challenged the U.S. in international affairs, most aggressively so in Ukraine and Syria.

The United States took extreme measures in its attempt to help Boris Yeltsin, a candidate facing almost certain defeat given the outlook in 1995, re-group and win the 1996 Russian presidential election. Levin claims that this effort required "one of the most massive electoral interventions recorded [between 1946 and 2000]," and that Yeltsin was an outlier, as in other situations where a candidate was that weak, they usually lost even with foreign assistance. Yeltsin was successful both because the U.S. intervened on his behalf and because he was adept at marshalling propaganda, funds, and outright acts of fraud to rescue his presidency. Levin also observed that electoral interference, in general, requires both a powerful actor in the "target country" to cooperate with the great power working on their behalf and the great power's perception

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<sup>66</sup> Scott Shane, "Russia Isn't the Only One Meddling in Elections. We Do It, Too," *New York Times*, February 17, 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Growth in domestic industry inadvertently happened when the ruble collapsed in 1998 and Russia was forced to dramatically decrease trade with the West because its currency was rejected internationally.

<sup>68</sup> "Russia's Road to Corruption," 17.

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that a rival candidate in the target country threatens its interests.”<sup>69</sup> This framework certainly applies to 1996, as the Clinton administration saw Yeltsin as “our man in Moscow” – the only hope for reform and westernization in Russia – and he welcomed assistance from Clinton and the IMF. On occasion, he even pleaded for it. Gennady Zyuganov was a threat to U.S. interests, both in Russia and regionally, and the United States, intent on the maintenance of its global hegemony, would consider it unacceptable if he won. In purportedly attempting to continue democratization and reform in Russia, the United States actually overrode democracy by hoisting a corrupt, domestically reviled Yeltsin to another term in office.

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*The research paper featured herein was written one year ago, and it was inspired by the news of Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election. However, this certainly does not imply that one event justifies the other. This capstone merely brings attention to a sparsely studied event in recent history and reminds readers that powers around the world seek to undermine democratic processes in national self-interest.*

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<sup>69</sup> “Russia’s Road to Corruption,” 190.