

# Heritage Lectures

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## Reasserting American Exceptionalism in the U.S.–Russia Relationship

*The Honorable John Boehner*

**Abstract:** *Articulating our values is no act of belligerence and certainly nothing to be sorry for. It's a duty, one we accept confidently and gratefully, and it's a President's duty as well. Over the past 10 years, our country has paid a high price to preserve freedom and liberty. The next 10 years will present more choices, more challenges. If this is going to be another American century, we must match the vigilance of those on the front lines of the mission of freedom: our servicemembers, intelligence professionals, diplomats, and their families. Let us stand with those who stand up to tyranny and aggression. Because if America won't lead the way, who will?*

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**EDWIN J. FEULNER, Ph.D.:** It is truly an honor for me to introduce our next conference speaker. He also happens to be “The Speaker.”

Heritage has worked closely with the Speaker and his staff over the years on a wide spectrum of issues, even before he was elected Speaker. Whether in his role as Republican Conference Chairman back in the '90s, Chairman of the House Education and Workforce Committee, House Majority Leader, or House Minority Leader, we always knew we had a willing listener and a great leader for conservative ideas and proposals.

This year, we shared a great success. Over the years, we have worked very closely with the Speaker on one of his top issues—allowing the continuation of the D.C.

### Talking Points

- The American people deserve a clear, coherent strategy for how we will engage a resurgent Russia.
- Instead of downplaying Russia's disregard for democratic values and human rights, we should call them on it—publicly, forcefully, frequently. The United States should insist Russia “reset” its own policies.
- When America leads, it gives optimism and hope. When America looks away, it causes confusion and uncertainty.
- The link between energy security and national security is getting stronger, and we must act to secure our own energy future.
- If this is going to be another American century, we must match the vigilance of those on the front lines of the mission of freedom: our servicemembers, our intelligence professionals, our diplomats, and their families.

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school choice program. And thanks to the Speaker's leadership, this program will remain intact.

Since the majority of the issues Congress grapples with on a daily basis are domestic, many times the general public doesn't get to see the Speaker's foreign policy principles in action. As I've said in the past, in Washington, the urgent tends to overwhelm the important.

But time and again I have been pleased to see the Speaker front and center (or center-right!) fighting to defend our nation, keeping the truly important ideas at the forefront. His opposition to spending cuts on defense is especially appreciated in this time of real threats around the globe.

We stand together on many other issues we face, and he has been a strong conservative advocate. I know he cares as deeply about our founding principles and their close connection to our leadership in the world as we do here at Heritage.

We are delighted to welcome him back to Heritage and to invite him to speak on "Reasserting American Exceptionalism in the U.S.–Russian Relationship." Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in welcoming the Speaker of the House—John Boehner.

—Edwin J. Feulner, Ph.D., is President of The Heritage Foundation.

**THE HONORABLE JOHN BOEHNER:** It's a pleasure to be with you this afternoon. I find this conference deeply reassuring. It's a reminder of the people and the values that America can rely on in uncertain times.

We're also fortunate, of course, to have recent history to call on. Our leaders were people of resolve—Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher—who, quite simply, loved freedom. They made their feelings well known, contagious, as if no one or no force could stand in their way.

When he died, she eulogized him. Frail but unbowed, the Iron Lady delivered a stirring tribute to a man who fulfilled his mission. "Others prophesied the decline of the West," she said. "He inspired America and its allies with renewed faith in their mission of freedom."

What brings us here today is not just an appreciation for all Reagan, Thatcher, and those Cold Warriors accomplished. We also remember the way things were before. It's why I once took my staff to the movies, actually.

In 2004, we went to see *Miracle*. If you haven't seen it, *Miracle* documents—with some Hollywood modifications—the story of the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team. We know how the movie ends: with a victory against all odds, one that stirred the nation's pride.

But I wanted my team to get a feel for how the story began. This was a time when the Soviets were thought to be unbeatable in more than just hockey; the best we could hope for back then was coexistence with an evil empire. Challenges were multiplying at home: a dormant economy, a listless government, and just a general sense of drift. It was a time that shaped how I view my country and its role in the world—and I know the same applies to many of you.

### **Amid This Uncertainty...**

Thirty years later, the parallels are obvious—though, of course, the world is not the same. The terrorist threat transcends traditional borders, our staunchest allies are drowning in debt, and in a tough economy, there are more questions about the extent of America's commitments abroad.

Amid this uncertainty, the list of countries lining up to fill the void is getting longer. On this list, we have to include Russia, which over the last two and a half years has been the beneficiary of American outreach and engagement.

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During that time, Russia has continued to expand its physical, political, and economic presence under the guise of what's strangely called a "sphere of influence." Within Russia, control is the order of the day, with key industries nationalized, the independent media repressed, and the loyal opposition beaten and jailed. Russia uses natural resources as a

political weapon, and it plays ball with unstable and dangerous regimes.

In Russia's use of old tools and old thinking, we see nothing short of an attempt to restore Soviet-style power and influence. Soon, Russia will be officially led by someone known to harbor intense Soviet nostalgia. Last month, the president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, announced he will step aside for his mentor, Vladimir Putin. Under this arrangement, Putin—who considers the collapse of the Soviet Union the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century—could stay in power until the middle of the next decade.

Less than a year ago, Vice President Biden said this: “Medvedev has rested everything on this notion of a reset. Who knows what Putin would do? My guess is he would not have gone there, but maybe.” So I think it's only appropriate to ask whether the Obama Administration will now reconsider its policy toward Russia.

Let me be clear: I'm not here to argue for open conflict or against productive engagement. There are several areas for potential cooperation between the United States and Russia: Arms control, counterterrorism, and trade are among them. But international cooperation can be transactional only to a point. We cannot sacrifice values or get away with walling off our interests from our moral imperatives. We can and should make clear that certain ideas are non-negotiable while keeping the door open for cooperation.

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President Kennedy was right to say “let us never fear to negotiate.” But he was also right to preface that with “let us never negotiate out of fear.” That's why the American people deserve a clear, coherent strategy for how we will engage a resurgent Russia.

### **The “Pledge to America”**

In the House of Representatives, our Republican majority has a governing agenda—we call it

our “Pledge to America.” In the Pledge, we made a commitment to listen to the American people and promote policies—whether they relate to jobs or protecting our homeland—that have their confidence and represent their values.

In the Pledge, we said that “we will never apologize for advancing the cause of freedom and democracy around the world, nor will we abandon our historic role in lifting up those who struggle to receive the blessings of liberty.” With that in mind, here's a handful of areas the House will be watching in terms of next steps with Russia.

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Let me start with missile defense. As you know, one of the first red flags about the “reset” came with the Administration's decision to cancel the U.S. missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. The decision was announced on the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland, with little notice given to Warsaw or Prague.

The House has gone on record in favor of prohibiting any agreements that limit our missile defense capabilities unless authorized by Congress or a new treaty. The House has also voted to limit funds for any attempts to share sensitive missile defense technology with the Russians. We will continue to insist on these restrictions. They're just common sense.

Russia is also eyeing, with the Administration's assistance, entry into the World Trade Organization. This would require Congress to approve permanent normal trade relations. There are, however, significant outstanding commercial issues which must be addressed.

I've also seen alarming reports that the Administration is leaning on Georgia to acquiesce, even though doing so would likely normalize the boundaries of Russian occupation on Georgian soil. In other words, the United States won't pressure Russia

for a return to pre-2008 borders. The Administration should resolve this stalemate in a manner that respects the territorial integrity of Georgia. Then—and only then—will movement on the WTO question be worth considering.

### Russia and Unstable Regimes

I mentioned Russia's relationship with unstable regimes. The recently uncovered plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador on U.S. soil is a clear indication that Iran remains a dangerous source of instability. When it comes to Iran, the Administration has a number of tools at its disposal—including U.N. sanctions, even though they were watered down by Russia.

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Russia's response—or lack of response—to this breach of international law will be telling. We should do more to compel the Kremlin to curtail its relationship with Iran, particularly related to its nuclear program and missile technology.

The Kremlin is also exploiting its growing energy monopoly, turning on and off the spigot in the Ukraine and Belarus and increasing Europe's energy dependence. Meanwhile, much of our own resources remains under lock and key, giving Russia and other countries who are utilizing their resources a decided advantage. The House continues to push for increased domestic energy production. The link between energy security and national security is getting stronger, and we must act to secure our own energy future.

Now, I read recently that the second phase of the “reset”—“reset 2.0,” if you will—will deal with democracy and human rights. Forgive me, but shouldn't these values be at the forefront of America's engagement with any country? Over the years, many ideas, many words, many leaders have tried to take the place of freedom. None have succeeded.

### When America Leads

Quite a track record, but certainly not the product of inertia or inevitability. When America leads, it gives optimism and hope. When America looks away, it causes confusion and uncertainty.

Instead of downplaying Russia's disregard for democratic values and human rights, we should call them on it—publicly, forcefully, frequently. The United States should insist Russia “reset” its own policies. If those appeals require teeth, the House stands ready to provide them.

As Speaker, my first meeting with a foreign head of state was with the Georgian president. That was no coincidence. Not long after that, I met with a group of opposition leaders from Belarus. I came away thinking one thing: We should have their backs. Last month, I opened the Parliamentary Forum for Democracy.

Through these exchanges, I learned firsthand that freedom most inspires those who remember life without it, who know the way things were before. What “we have learned,” President Reagan said not long before he left office, is that “the first objective of the adversaries of freedom is to make free nations question their own faith in freedom.” These adversaries, he continued, want us to “think that adhering to our principles and speaking out against human rights abuses or foreign aggression is somehow an act of belligerence.”

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### Articulating American Values

Articulating our values is no act of belligerence and certainly nothing to be sorry for. It's a duty, one we accept confidently and gratefully. And, I would add, it's a President's duty as well.

Over the past 10 years, our country has paid a high price to preserve freedom and liberty. The next 10 years will present more choices, more challeng-

es. But I'm confident we'll prevail. I certainly sense resolve in this room.

But if this is going to be another American century, we must match the vigilance of those on the front lines of the mission of freedom. I'm talking about our servicemembers, our intelligence professionals,

our diplomats, and their families. I know you all join me in thanking them—and I know you all join me in praying for those who aspire to freedom.

Let us stand with those who stand up to tyranny and aggression. Because if America won't lead the way, who will?