



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Reflections on Solzhenitsyn and America

Reflections on Solzhenitsyn and America¹

*The beauty of democracy is its ability to change.
The danger to democracy is assuming it cannot. - anon*

*Walk softly, and carry a big stick. -Teddy Roosevelt.
Talk softly, and carry a big stick. -anon*

*A submissive sheep is a find for a wolf.
-Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*

August 12, 2008 and April 24, 2009

Your on the Street Reporter is off the streets and on the waters. As recounted in earlier reports, we had departed Russia, leaving behind the wondrous sights of Moscow's Red Square and the whimsical views of St. Petersburg. We had recently toured Helsinki and Stockholm. We had paid calls on Oslo, Copenhagen, Berlin, and Tallinn, with earlier stops in London and Wales. In between, I made a fast trip to Scotland to watch my nephew compete in the British Seniors Open.

Now, we were sailing back to England, a two-day voyage. It was time for cruise ship relaxations and hedonism. I know of no better venue for playing-out one's desire for lethargic pleasures than staying on a well-run cruise ship. Granted, you won't find some of the Las Vegas amenities on a cruise ship. Unlike Sin City, the high seas hotels have rules against selling certain physical pleasures, but other pastimes are a few steps away from your stateroom.

I had somewhat fulfilled my dreams with visits to Moscow and St. Petersburg. I say somewhat because I had not allotted enough time for the places I wanted to see. Also, Estonia is now high on my list. So is Helsinki and Stockholm. And of course, so is Russia. I'm headed back to the Northeast Baltic before too long.

By the way, this segment of the Baltic Sea Reports will have no travelogue writing. I make this statement to warn-off my readers who read these essays for their scenic descriptions but not for more serious discourse.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Today, I learned about the August 3 death of a great man, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. All of us should read at least some of his work. Notably, his three books on the Soviet Gulag. Solzhenitsyn spent eight years in prisons and three years in exile. His crime? In a private letter to a friend, he made anti-Stalinist remarks. For citizens who have a habit of complaining about how they are treated in America and other free nations, his work should be required reading.

Figure 1 shows two photos of Solzhenitsyn.² The left picture was taken during his time in prison (1953). The right picture shows him after he left the Soviet Union (around 1974). Not surprisingly, he looks happier in the right photo.

¹ The photo in the thought cloud is sourced from the back cover of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (abridged), New York: HarperCollins, 1985.



Figure 1. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Solzhenitsyn's later writings resonate about the dangers of despotism, but they also point to present and future dangers for western democracies. When I first read about his criticisms of the West (especially America), I was taken-aback and was in disagreement with his views. Now, I find myself agreeing with more of his points than in the past. But I also find some of his criticisms of America and the West disingenuous.

I am offering this essay as food for thought. As always, I hope you and I can have a discourse about the subject. For the sunshine patriots reading this essay, I've some criticisms of my country, America. It is only by self-examination that democracies can continue to change and grow stronger. If I insult your nationalist spirit during your reading, keep that thought in mind.

In 1978, after having received the Noble Peace Prize (awarded in 1970), Solzhenitsyn gave a speech (a commencement address) at Harvard.³ He made these points (text within quotes are taken directly from his speech):

Blindness of Superiority

“But the blindness of superiority (of Western nations) continues in spite of all and upholds the belief that vast regions everywhere on our planet should develop and mature to the level of present day Western systems which in theory are the best and in practice the most attractive. There is this belief that all those other worlds are only being temporarily prevented by wicked governments or by heavy crises or by their

² Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (abridged), New York: HarperCollins, 1985. Left photo, p. 363. Right photo, p. 2 of back matter.

³ See <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/arch/solzhenitsyn/harvard1978.html> for the text of this speech.

own barbarity or incomprehension from taking the way of Western pluralistic democracy and from adopting the Western way of life. Countries are judged on the merit of their progress in this direction. However, it is a conception that developed out of Western incomprehension of the essence of other worlds, out of the mistake of measuring them all with a Western yardstick. The real picture of our planet's development is quite different.”

As mentioned, when I came across this speech, his comments gave me pause. I was not so naïve to assume America was not arrogant. I lived overseas for over two years and had witnessed our presence in the Philippines and other Asian countries; I was in and out of Vietnam several times during the war; I had seen the movie, *The Ugly American*. (My date thought Marlon Brando was far from ugly.) I knew we were not as pretty as we pumped and primped ourselves to be.

What's New?

I have reread his paragraph cited above several times. It could have been written from the time we humans knew how to write. The only difference would be the subject matter. For Solzhenitsyn, it was the Western world. But let's substitute the Western world for any number of other subjects, including:

The Mongols who considered themselves superior to west Asians and east Europeans; the Crusaders who believed their ways were superior to the infidel Muslims; the Muslims who had the opposite view; the Chinese who thought Westerners were ugly illiterates; the Japanese who thought Westerners were unrefined primitives; the Chinese who thought the Japanese were barbarians; the Japanese who thought the Chinese were uncivilized, and so on.

How did these “superior” cultures come to their conclusions? They measured others with their own yardstick. And if they had the requisite tool (military power), they imported their way-of-life into the foreign territory, and forced the defeated to take up a different yardstick.

So, in fairness to the “blindness of superiority” of western civilization, Mr. Solzhenitsyn, you should place the West in a queue alongside many other civilizations.

The American: Ugly or Beautiful?

Nonetheless, his statements, “blindness of superiority,” and “the mistake of measuring (other countries) with a Western yardstick,” are worthy of consideration. The question we should be asking is: Are these attitudes counter-productive to America's interests? Let's examine this idea.

The view of superiority of Western values and proselytizing these values has been a lynchpin of many conservative's strategies and the NeoCons' views. It is a philosophy that has been tested since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The proponents point to our better ways, to our obligation to spread the word. Truth is, I do not disagree with this philosophy. Where I draw the line is *how* it is practiced.

Consider this idea: What if there are people who do not want the word to be spread---especially into their own cultures? We spread it anyway. What's good for America is good for the world. Is

this concept a reasonable approach to conducting foreign relations? In the long run, it may be the correct view.

But with a notable caveat, one I have emphasized in earlier essays: Fostering democracy requires much more than dethroning despots and holding elections. After all, under relatively benign conditions, it took America decades to create itself. Yet during many of our campaigns into other countries, our strategy has been just that: kick-out the (former) despot and hold elections in a few months---even if the elections result in the ascension of a (new) despot. Don't worry about the vast infrastructure needed to support the person going to the voting booth...an aspect called the Rule of Law (with its stupendous foundations). Don't be concerned about the centuries-old customs that have been embedded into these cultures.

Supposing democracy is the only way to go, how can we do this? With patience, by understanding other countries' yardsticks and keeping these yardsticks in one hand, by talking softly, usually walking softly, and keeping a big stick in the other hand. If we really believe in our way of life, we must give it much time to grow. Patience is not an American virtue. It must become one.

Is democracy the only viable way for a society to function? No. Is it then, a preferable way? In the long run, I think so, but only if the practice of democracy affords people the luxury of choices about how they live. And in the long run---the very long run---I hold the belief that people will opt for having choices as opposed to not having choices.

But we should keep in mind: If holding elections in an Afghanistan village offers choices, fine. If consulting with the designated village elder in an Afghanistan village offers choices, also fine. We cannot change every culture on earth to our way of behavior. We cannot change centuries-old habits, and as long as these parties do us no harm, we should leave them alone.

Let there be no mistake, primarily, people opt for security and material well-being, even over a ballot box, even over a religion. If politics or religion cannot offer a shield of protection to people, the people will look for alternatives.

No better example is post WWII Europe. Due largely to severe economic conditions, many European countries were sliding toward radical forms of socialism or communism. The people believed their pre-war quasi-socialistic, semi-capitalistic governments had failed them. To a great extent, they had. But the United States rallied Europe with a *key concept* of the Marshall Plan: Provide fuller stomachs than the socialists and communists could offer. The people were looking for an alternative. They did not care which political philosophy resulted in bread on the table.

But make no mistake, evil is not an abstract concept drummed up by Hollywood script writers. As Solzhenitsyn himself said, "A submissive sheep is a find for a wolf."⁴ That so called-wolf is not going away. As the first part of this essay noted, Teddy Roosevelt advised, "Walk softly, and carry a big stick." Anon would agree and also offer, "Talk softly, and carry a big stick."

⁴ Solzhenitsyn, p. 9.

Look to Ourselves First

Over the last couple decades, our country was placed a curtain of self-satisfaction around itself. It appears our once healthy practices of self-criticism and self-analysis are now considered to be unpatriotic. Yet, these traits have been keys to keeping America a vibrant society. Consider the amendments to our Constitution; consider our Civil War; consider how we reacted to and recovered from the Depression. What did we do to right ourselves? We identified our shortcomings, then rolled up our sleeves and went to work to fix them.

“America, love it or leave it,” is a clever cliché, but its meaning has been distorted to, “America, don’t say anything bad about it. Otherwise, leave it.” It is disheartening to know a large segment of Americans are cast as “un-American” just because they have complaints about their own country that they wish to repair.

As cited above, Solzhenitsyn put it this way, “...it is a conception which developed out of Western incomprehension of the essence of other worlds, out of the mistake of measuring them all with a Western yardstick.”

To take one example: China. China does not hold elections such as those in the USA: Where a candidate can win an election without obtaining a majority of the votes; where a politician can gerrymander geographical boundaries to isolate himself from voters’ wrath; where elections are won by having the most funds in the campaign chest; or the best Internet Web site. Because China does not practice these ideas, it is assailed by most Americans. Yes, I joke, but I do not. We need to do a bit of house cleaning ourselves before we apply our broom to others’ living quarters.

We ask why can’t those Chinese hold elections as we do? Among other reasons, such as having centuries of rule with undemocratic hierarchies, the Chinese are deeply afraid of the post Cold War Russian democratic model. They say, “No, thank you. We prefer our culture to be stable, not one of chaos and corruption.” They have their own yardstick. And I think they are accurate in what would happen to China if it underwent a Russian-like change.

My critics will say, but in the long run, China will eventually transform itself into an American-like democracy. Perhaps, but not before it goes through a dangerous revolutionary transition. The old saw, “Be careful what you wish for; it might come true,” should be kept in mind.

Let’s let sleeping China dogs lie. Let’s let them use their own yardstick. Let’s compete with China based on our strengths of democracy, republicanism, religious freedom, and regulated capitalism. There are no equals.

During all these maneuvers, let’s keep the paragraph from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in mind. On occasion, a bit of humble pie is not a bad recipe for part of a meal. He focused only on the West. He ignored a lot of history in his criticism. But he was on the mark in suggesting alternative ways to conduct international relations.

Materialism

In his speech, Solzhenitsyn went on to describe Western democracy and the good life that Western nations enjoyed:

In the process, however, one psychological detail has been overlooked: the constant desire to have still more things and a still better life and the struggle to obtain them imprints many Western faces with worry and even depression, though it is customary to conceal such feelings. ...the majority of people have been granted well-being to an extent their fathers and grandfathers could not even dream about.... Even biology knows that habitual extreme safety and well-being are not advantageous for a living organism. Today, well-being in the life of Western society has begun to reveal its pernicious mask.

Solzhenitsyn's remarks are harsh and unforgiving. Are they correct? Even if he has a sound argument, again, what else is new? Furthermore, can he offer a better model? His native Russia? The Sudan? China? Cuba?

He tells us an organism living in safety is not safe. OK, let's pack all of them up and send them to a Gulag to hone their survival skills. I try to grasp the full meaning of his statements. I am not successful.

But I can infer. My inference is that he is telling us the West has grown too soft. That we have become too materialistic. I also read from his comments that we have changed our priorities on community and family to that of making money.

Let's address this issue with two examples of how America practices so-called capitalism: (a) on Wall Street, and (b) on Main Street.

Wall Street. As I've claimed in *The Nearly Perfect Storm* book, Wall Street is one sick puppy. Traders, bankers, and fund managers---abetted by an incompetent, misguided government--- have perfected the obnoxious practice of "privatizing profits and socializing risks." The bail-out itself has underscored and reinforced the routine of these welfare capitalists.

Nor are these people doing anything useful for our society. No Microsofts, Googles, or Intels can be found on Wall Street. Money is simply moved around---to the tune of making up 41% of American corporate profits, double what it was only twenty years ago.

Having spent part of my professional life as a businessman and owner of companies, I am a poster boy for free enterprise. I've done business in fifteen countries around the world, and I've found America to be unexcelled in encouraging, promoting, and rewarding creativity and innovation.

But I am convinced the financial meltdown of 2008 revealed serious flaws in America's practice of capitalism. Again, Wall Street does not really do anything of structural value to America. As said, it moves money around, which makes the Federal Reserve money-velocity folks happy.

Twenty years ago, finance/banking made up 20% of American corporate profits. As mentioned, today it is 41%.⁵

A problem we have been ignoring is the increasing disparity between America's income and wealth of our extreme underclass and extreme upper class. I find this situation troublesome, but because of my inclination toward free enterprise and competition, I find it difficult to write about.

My nature leans toward an unfettered, unregulated market place. But my sixth sense (and experience) tells me we humans cannot function in such an environment. If any of my readers doubt this idea, I simply ask you to reread *The Nearly Perfect Storm*. I am sad to admit it documents the failure of laissez-faire capitalism.

At the risk of incurring Rush Limbaugh's wrath, I also ask my readers to consider these facts: In 1979 the top 0.1% of Americans earned 20 times the income of the bottom 90% of the population. And keep in mind that many of these rich people were doing something useful, such as inventing the Internet and discovering the DNA blueprint. Today, the same percentage of Americans (0.1%) now earn 77 times more than those folks on the bottom rungs.⁶

Even with my libertarian DNA and my love for free enterprise, I find these statistics obnoxious. Say what we will about Sweden's high taxes, about Norway's social net, about Finland's egalitarianism. None of these countries has mentally deficient people sleeping on the streets. All of their citizens have health care.

Many rich Americans are rich---not because they have merit---but because we Americans have allowed the privatizing of profits and the socialization of risks to become part of our financial *and social* fabric. Sadly, and as mentioned above, the bailout goes a long way to embed this culture further into our national psyche.

Main Street. The argument that Main Street Americans (and the Western world) are moving toward materialism sparks a lot of debate on talk shows and in the press. I now live in a conservative and reserved area of America, one in which I do not see a lot of conspicuous consumption. If I lived in Manhattan, I might have a different view of this debate. In New York City, I come across more "go-getters" than in Hayden Lake, Idaho. Wall Streeters are in their jobs to make money. That's it. Nothing else.

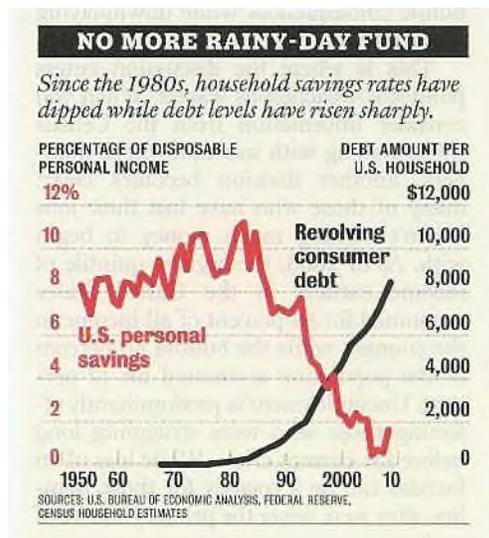
No question, with each passing generation, we become richer and are thus endowed with more materials. However, and this may be Solzhenitsyn's point, we continue to buy more "materialistic" goods at the expense of saving. The house in which I was reared was considered a fine, spacious building in my childhood. Today, it would fit inside about half of the first floor of most Americans' three-story bungalows. In our home up here in Idaho, we have five televisions sets---for two humans and a dog. We have "extra" homes spread around parts of the country.

⁵ "The Rich Under Attack," *The Economist*, April 4, 2009, p. 15.

⁶ Ibid.

Are we Solzhenitsyn's villains? It would appear that we are, yet I don't think of myself as being materialistic. I don't like jewelry. I buy most of my clothes from big box stores. I purchase a new Toyota only after our current car begins to embarrass my wife.

I think a more relevant question should be: Is the West moving toward materialism at the expense of sacrificing something else? In America, the answer is yes. Take a look at Figure 2.⁷ It shows the savings and spending trends of Americans since 1950. The information on this chart reflects an extraordinary change in the mentality of Americans. I imagine sociologists will offer explanations such as the passing-away of the Depression and WWII generations, those who suffered hardships and knew it wise to store away money for a rainy day.



If any of my readers are not representative of the profiles in this figure. If you save, if you are not deeply in debt, I offer that you should be an outraged citizen. Why?

Because you are bankrolling your fellow residents who have leveraged themselves to the point where any slight downturn in the economy puts them on the government dole.

Is the average Joe or Josephine more materialistic than his and her forbears were? Based on Figure 2, yes. And the 2008 financial meltdown has been a big wake-up call.⁸

Figure 2. Materialism and debt.

We should also ask, does the desire for “more things” necessarily erode our characters? I don't know, but I'm skeptical about correlating materialism and well-being of the West with a “pernicious mask.”

Again, Solzhenitsyn's remarks are not only germane to the West, they are germane to human nature, and include the East, Far East, Middle East, and other parts of our globe.

I lean this way: We are not more materialistic. We just have more materials. Our standards of living have increased. Does this fact translate into Solzhenitsyn's view that, “...the constant desire to have still more things and a still better life and the struggle to obtain them imprints many Western faces with worry and even depression”?

⁷ Richard Thaler, “It Doesn't Have to Hurt,” *Newsweek*, April 20, 2009, p. 32.

⁸ Many citizens have blamed the IRA system for their financial plight. Some of my friends have seen up to 40-50% of their retirement funds disappear. I have great empathy for them, but no sympathy. The problem is not the IRA. It is the fact that their IRAs were mostly made up of stocks and mutual funds consisting of worthless Wall Street instruments.

To answer, I'm not certain human nature has changed toward more materialism. I do believe we Americans have become careless. We have assumed the past fifty years of prosperity, and the ever-increasing appreciation of real estate would insulate us from risk. The trend lines in Figure 2 do not represent degradation of sound character. They represent degradation of sound judgment.

Take a look at the faces in Sudan. In the Congo. In Sri Lanka. In Rwanda. And many other faces around the globe. Those places are where we see the imprints of faces with worry and depression.

Civility

Solzhenitsyn also claimed, "The Western world has lost its civil courage." The word *civil* can refer to concepts, such as politeness. It can also refer to the ideas of human interactions in a broader context.

We cannot deny that the social fabric of the West has coarsened. Civility is not what it was when I was younger. Nor was it for my parents or my grandparents, or their grandparents, or theirs, and so on down through our family trees.

When did we humans begin our dissension into immoral, materialistic incivility? At what point did the Noble Savage start to pickup nasty and ill-mannered habits? Was the Neanderthal our pinnacle? Was it the Cro-Magnon?

Solzhenitsyn lays blame on the West. I lay it on mankind and no one including you, me, or Solzhenitsyn can pinpoint when all this so-called depravity began to contaminate our species.

Do I care? I've make some snide remarks, but I do care. Civility is a lynchpin for a compassionate society. But I do not have anything close to an answer. At Denny's recently, my mother-in-law and I were having brunch. After watching a teenager walk by, she said she was offended by his pants that precariously hung over his buttocks. So was I. I prefer eating my Seniors French Toast Special without a side order of ass cracks.

But where do we draw the line? I recall a quote from George Washington about civility, "Every action done in company ought to be with some sign of respect to those that are present."⁹ On the surface, Washington's idea seems reasonable. But if taken literally, it could lead to everyone on earth behaving the same way! Human nature is not like that. But Washington's advice is not meant to be literal. It is meant to convey the idea of respect for others, even those with whom we disagree.

Legalism

As some of my readers may recall, I have written about the trap America is falling into because of its ever-increasing dependence on laws. On several occasions, I've asked my readers to read the book, *The Death of Common Sense*, by Philip K. Howard. We would be wise to heed Solzhenitsyn's observations and advice---and those of Mr. Howard---on this matter:

⁹ *George Washington's Rules of Civility and Decent Behavior* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Book, 1988), p. 9.

People in the West have acquired considerable skill in using, interpreting, and manipulating law, even though laws tend to be too complicated for an average person to understand without the help of an expert. Any conflict is solved according to the letter of the law, and this is considered the supreme solution. If one is right from a legal point of view, nothing more is required, nobody may mention that one could still not be entirely right, and urge self-restraint, a willingness to renounce such legal rights, sacrifice, and selfless risk: it would sound simply absurd... .

I have spent all my life under a communist regime, and I will tell you that a society without any objective legal scale is a terrible one indeed. But a society with no other scale but the legal one is not quite worthy of man either. *A society that is based on the letter of the law and never reaches any higher is taking very scarce advantage of the high level of human possibilities.* [The italics are mine.] The letter of the law is too cold and formal to have a beneficial influence on society. Whenever the tissue of life is woven of legalistic relations, there is an atmosphere of moral mediocrity, paralyzing man's noblest impulses.

Let's spend a few moments with *The Death of Common Sense*.¹⁰ The author, Philip K. Howard, states that law is essential, but "...with a few exceptions, it fails in even its simplest tasks." He cites hundreds of examples. One that stands out is a law in New York that goes into this level of detail about children's artwork, "[S]tudent art displays...[must be] kept at least two feet from ceilings, 10 feet from exits [which means any door] and ...not exceed 20% of the wall surface."¹¹

Fantastic, and this code covers only one small subject. We can only imagine how many other laws are on the books in New York and other states that attempt to save us from ourselves---an impossible task. Yet, as I write this essay, the Federal Tax Code has been re-issued. In 1939, it was 504 pages; in 1969, 16,500 pages, in 1995, 40,500 pages; in 2009, it is 70,320 pages. This figure is not a typo.

Although he did not express this next thought explicitly, *Solzhenitsyn was on to something*. As stated earlier, he lamented the increasing softness of the West, and I would tie this trait partially to the fact that many citizens rely on the law, and not their own resources, to redress their complaints. Further, Howard states:¹²

- "One basic change in approach will get us going: We should stop looking to law to provide the final answer."
- " 'We must spread the gospel,' Judge Cardozo said in the 1920, "that there is no gospel to spare us the pain of choosing at every step.' "

¹⁰ Philip K. Howard, *The Death of Common Sense: How Law is Suffocating America* (New York: Warner Books, 1996).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

- “Conquering human nature was not the idea when our founders devised a new nation around the freedom of the human. Avoiding coercion by making law into a detailed manual only assures another form of coercion.”

-

The East is Better than the West

Solzhenitsyn continues his critique of the West by comparing it to the East:

“A fact which cannot be disputed is the weakening of human beings in the West while in the East they are becoming firmer and stronger. Six decades for our people and three decades for the people of Eastern Europe; during that time, we have been through a spiritual training far in advance of Western experience. Life's complexity and mortal weight have produced stronger, deeper, and more interesting characters than those produced by standardized Western well-being. Therefore, if our society were to be transformed into yours, it would mean an improvement in certain aspects, but also a change for the worse on some particularly significant scores. It is true, no doubt, that a society cannot remain in an abyss of lawlessness, as is the case in our country. But it is also demeaning for it to elect such mechanical legalistic smoothness as you have. After the suffering of decades of violence and oppression, the human soul longs for things higher, warmer and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits, introduced by the revolting invasion of publicity, by TV stupor and by intolerable music.”

Granted, Solzhenitsyn was writing before parts of the East revealed themselves to the world, but on this subject, the speaker sounds a bit crabby, as well as inaccurate. Consulting a world map, I place Bosnia and Serbia in the East. Spiritual training? More interesting characters? Such as those Eastern leaders in the former Yugoslavia who have been hauled up to world courts for war crimes? I also place Russia in the East. Putin's reign brought forth curtailment of human rights, and the shutting-down of adversarial news organs. We can also make the observation that the West does not have a monopoly on TV dumbness or intolerable music. I found Russia to have all these features as well.

Loss of Willpower

He addresses the willpower of the West:

And yet -- no weapons, no matter how powerful, can help the West until it overcomes its loss of willpower. In a state of psychological weakness, weapons become a burden for the capitulating side. To defend oneself, one must also be ready to die; there is little such readiness in a society raised in the cult of material well-being. Nothing is left, then, but concessions, attempts to gain time and betrayal. Thus, at the shameful Belgrade conference, free Western diplomats in their weakness surrendered the line where enslaved members of Helsinki Watchgroups are sacrificing their lives.

America may suffer from some of the problems described by Solzhenitsyn, but loss of willpower is not one of them. His comments ignore any reference to the West's dedication to The Cold War against the USSR, including the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, NATO, SEATO, CENTO; as well as institutions created to stabilize the world and promote well-being among third world countries, such as the IMF and the World Bank.

Whatever one thinks about our military involvements in other parts of the world, the West (specifically, American and the UK) cannot be accused of lacking willpower! But I would side with him in today's situation. A member of NATO, the United States, was attacked by the Taliban, who had sanctuary in Afghanistan. Yet, America's NATO allies have made a mockery of this alliance: "Most of the NATO nations that grudgingly send dribs and drabs of troops to Afghanistan send them enveloped in caveats that virtually vitiate their usefulness, including the stipulation that they shall not be put in harm's way."¹³

Nonetheless (and Mr. Will's remarks are on the mark), I would like to have heard what Solzhenitsyn had to say about the West when the Berlin Wall came down.

Loss of Rectitudes

Throughout Solzhenitsyn's speech, he takes the West to task. Many of his points revolve around our loss of moral, spiritual, religious rectitude. Here are a few examples:

- "How did the West decline from its triumphal march to its present sickness?... [It came about from] the proclaimed and enforced autonomy of man from any higher force above him. It could also be called anthropocentricity, with man seen as the center of everything that exists."
- "...everywhere in the West; a total liberation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice. State systems were becoming increasingly and totally materialistic. The West ended up by truly enforcing human rights, sometimes even excessively, but man's sense of responsibility to God and society grew dimmer and dimmer."
- "On the way from the Renaissance to our days we have enriched our experience, but we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility. We have placed too much hope in political and social reforms, only to find out that we were being deprived of our most precious possession: our spiritual life."
- [Life on earth] "has to be the fulfillment of a permanent, earnest duty so that one's life journey may become an experience of moral growth, so that one may leave life a better human being than one started it."

Spirituality in 2009

Solzhenitsyn was making these comments in the late 1970s, a time when Europe and America were shifting toward more secularism (for Europe even more so than America). Today, the pendulum has swung back the other way. According to the American Religious Identification

¹³ George F. Will, "The *What* of Nations?" *Newsweek*, April 20, 2009, p. 64.

Survey, the percentage of self-identified Christians in America in 2009 was 76% of the population (Jewish: 1.2%; Muslim: 0.6%).¹⁴ Seventy-six percent of the population represents a country that is definitely defined by religious faith. These facts undermine some of Solzhenitsyn's claims about the decline of spirituality in the West (at least in America).

However, giving him his due, in 1990 the percentage of self-identified Christians was 86% of the population. Clearly, the trend is downward. Why? Perhaps Solzhenitsyn's bugaboo of materialism is eating away at religious foundations. But another explanation might be more accurate:

It is reasonable to think that most Americans understand this idea,"...freedom for one sect means freedom for all sects."¹⁵ Some conservative Christians hold the view that a nation's political life should be governed (not based, but governed) by their interpretation of the Bible. Thus,

If the church believes drinking to be a sin, for instance, then the laws of the state should ban the consumption of alcohol. If the church believes the theory of evolution conflicts with a literal reading of the Book of Genesis, then the public schools should tailor their lessons accordingly. If the church believes abortion should be outlawed, then the legislatures and courts of the land should follow suit.¹⁶

If you find this idea appealing, I ask you to consider that the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are not the direct foundations of our republic. That would be the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.¹⁷ If religion from a Good Book dictates the laws of the state, you may be the winner today...but you may not be the winner tomorrow.

Solzhenitsyn concludes his speech with this thought:

“If the world has not come to its end, it has approached a major turn in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will exact from us a spiritual upsurge, we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life where our physical nature will not be cursed as in the Middle Ages, but, even more importantly, our spiritual being will not be trampled upon as in the Modern era.”

Summing Up

I admire the noble, ascetic ideas of Solzhenitsyn's speech. I find many of them idealistic but I think even those are worthy of consideration. After all, we humans seem find fault and mock those whom we say are idealistic. Frankly, I would rather be in the company of idealists than cynics.

I take the liberty of altering one of Howard's ideas with, “Accepting the imperfections and asymmetries of human nature is probably the bitterest pill [for some

¹⁴ Jon Meacham, “The End of Christian America,” *Time*, April 13, 2009, p. 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Of course, the founding fathers were deeply religious and our birthing documents are suffused with Christian contexts.

idealists].”¹⁸ Yet, just consider the hardships Solzhenitsyn endured. His ability to write those last lines quoted above says much about his humaneness.

Solzhenitsyn is asking human kind to “reach for the stars.” As the old fable tells us, reaching the stars is not as important as *trying* to reach them. Given human nature, I am not sure we will ever reach Solzhenitsyn’s stars. Does that mean we should not try?

We cease trying at our own peril. As anon said,

*The beauty of democracy is its ability to change.
The danger to democracy is assuming it cannot.*

As we learn time and again, it is often not the arrival that counts. What matters is the journey to that arrival. And during that journey, it is our self-analysis and self-criticism---our willingness to correct ourselves, to alter our human condition---that will keep us as a vibrant, energetic society.

¹⁸ Howard, p. 186.