

The Devil Went Down to Georgia **by Dan Jacoby**

Russia has invaded two so-called “breakaway provinces” that are officially part of the sovereign nation of Georgia. Now, despite of two cease-fire announcements, the Russians are not leaving. In addition, they are threatening to open up a second front by invading Poland.

So whose fault is it?

Clearly, there is a convoluted situation in the area known as South Ossetia. Both South Ossetia and Georgia were annexed by Russia in 1801, but the area has been Balkanized for centuries, and neither the Romanovs nor Soviet rulers were able to change that. Both North and South Ossetians have long fought for unification. North Ossetians tended to be willing to be, if not part of Russia, at least closely associated with that country. South Ossetians, on the other hand, have tended to prefer complete autonomy.

When the Soviet Union split up, North Ossetia remained under Russian rule, and South Ossetia, while technically part of Georgia, fought a minor war that ended with de facto independence of Georgia in 1995.

In 2004, the new Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, moved at first to bring the semi-autonomous region more firmly under Georgian control, but later presented a plan that would cement even more local control by a South Ossetian government. In a 2006 referendum, the people of South Ossetia almost unanimously expressed their desire to split off from Georgia and create their own, independent state. For the past two years, there have been several incidents of violence, generally South Ossetian separatists attacking Georgian military.

Complicating the matter is the high probability that separatists from neighboring Chechnya, a region under Russian control that has been fighting for independence, are hiding in Georgia, and staging attacks from Georgia into Russia.

Over the past two months, the situation has intensified, as the Georgian and South Ossetian military have exchanged several gunfire and mortar attacks, each accusing the other of being the aggressor. Russian military planes have overflowed the area in a show of strength and support for South Ossetian separatists.

In early July, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that the U.S. would support Georgia’s entry into NATO. This just added more fuel to the fire, since Russia has been increasingly uneasy at the appearance that they are being militarily isolated.

Late on August 1, Russian forces entered South Ossetia.

Since the invasion, many political leaders of the western world have officially condemned Russia for their invasion, but aside from some humanitarian aid to Georgia, nobody has done anything about it. Two cease-fire announcements have proven inaccurate. The Russian military invasion has come within shouting distance of the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. And now, in protest over the U.S. announcement that it will put an anti-missile system in Poland, Russia is threatening to invade that country as well.

Clearly, Russia bears much of the blame, since they actually invaded a neighboring country in force, and may be planning to annex regions that do not belong to them. But Russia is not alone. The Georgian government has failed to resolve the situation. Regional entities, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), have also failed to step up and find a solution. The United Nations has failed as well.

Meanwhile, George W. Bush continues to prove that he is either horribly deluded, or the world's greatest idiot. He actually said, "Bullying and intimidation are not acceptable ways to conduct foreign policy in the 21st century," apparently unaware that bullying and intimidation (and invasion) are exactly how he has conducted foreign policy. Great!

This could have been an opportunity for the United States to be the world's diplomatic leader, but it won't happen for two reasons. First, a good case could be made that if Russia weren't feeling so threatened by Bush administration policies (expanding NATO and putting anti-missile systems in former Warsaw Pact countries), they might be willing to negotiate rather than invade. Second, the way George W. Bush has handled this situation already makes it impossible for the United States to have any part of any diplomatic settlement.

This begs another question: Is it possible that George W. Bush wanted this situation?

It is well known that Bush has a fixation on Armageddon. Indeed, many people believe that his invasion of Iraq, with no provocation, and sold to America on a passel of lies, was his attempt to bring Armageddon. Expansion of war into the Caucasus only brings the world closer to a "final war." Certainly the Bush administration's foreign policy in the region seems designed specifically to cause Russia to take military action.

Regardless of whether this speculation is legitimate or plain foolishness, it is clear that George W. Bush deserves much of the blame for the situation as well. He could have spent the last seven years working with the man whose soul he claimed to know to help bring Russia into the 21st century as part of the western world, rather than isolating Russia militarily. He could have adopted a policy of diplomacy over invasion when there is no threat to America. He could have made friends around the world, instead of enemies. He could have tackled the "terrorist threat" head-on, instead of diverting his attention and our resources.

Unfortunately, George W. Bush, whether deluded or idiotic, is certainly unfit for command. And now the price is being paid, not only in our country and Iraq, but in Georgia as well.

There are a lot of devils at work here.