

JC Watts column
Stephens Media Group
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"Eyes so transparent that through them the soul is seen."

- *Pierre Theophile Gautier*

It's not politically correct in my circles nowadays to quote a man of French descent, but when the 19th century French journalist/novelist Gautier said this, little did he know that he may have been referring to a 21st century U.S. president in relationship to another world leader.

It was not that many years ago that President Bush, in reference to Russian President Vladimir Putin, commented that when he looked in the Russian's eyes, he saw that he could trust him.

This trusting soul looked for a soul he could trust, and I'm not so sure his insight was 20/20.

Is Putin a friend or a foe? The jury is still out, but the verdict doesn't look promising. Perhaps the president was being optimistic.

My dad used to tell me that if you find an injured snake on the side of the road and nurse him back to health, don't be surprised when he eventually bites you, because he's still a snake.

A quick history lesson here would remind all of us that Putin is a veteran of the KGB, where he once was charged with putting down dissidents in Leningrad. In the late 1980s, of course, the KGB was rendered impotent when the Soviets gave up on the arms race, and communism fell. Truth be told, the old cold warriors gave in not because they bought into the policies of the west -- like freedom of religion or freedom of the press -- but because of America's strength.

Now, I'm wondering if Putin is pleased with the fact that Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hamas, Hezbollah and North Korea are stirring the international pot in a manner that would have made old KGB veterans like Andropov, Chebrikov and Kryuchkov red with envy.

I wonder this because under Putin's leadership, the Russians have been hesitant to fully sign off on UN resolutions against North Korea, Iran and Iraq.

For example...

One such resolution bans all UN states from selling technology and munitions to or receiving same from North Korea. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il (who, not coincidentally, was known in his youth in the Soviet Union as Yuri Irsenovich), failed miserably in his July 5th missile launch, yet has pledged to continue missile launches against the West.

Kim referred to his missile launch as self defense. Ironically, when the US does things to defend itself, it is referred to on the international stage as being a unilateral bully.

Now, North Korea is procuring materials related to weapons of mass destruction, even as they had committed to dismantling their existing WMD program in 2005.

President Bush got blistered by Putin, among others, for naming North Korea, Iran and Iraq the Axis of Evil early in his presidency. It kind of makes you scratch your head and wonder if Russia really is a friend. It really makes you wonder what the president saw when he gazed in Putin's eyes.

When observing Putin, I can't help but remind myself that Putin doesn't believe we should have gone after Saddam Hussein, in spite of the fact that his own diplomatic team voted with 14 nations to say Iraq should come clean? Since that vote, it has been established that Russia had a significant economic interest in Iraq.

Looking beyond his eyes, the president challenged Putin some months ago over Russia's crackdown on dissent from Democracy. A verbal spanking about snuffing out dissent had to get under the skin of the old KGBer, for sure.

One wonders, when Putin proclaims that Russia won't take part in any crusades or in any holy alliances, was this a signal to the radical Islamist terrorists -- a wink and a nod so to speak -- to keep doing what they're doing? That was a perplexing and troubling statement.

As a member of the UN Security Council, one would think Putin would be concerned about the threats to blow Iran off the map, yet he has planted himself squarely on the fence on that matter. He has yet to utter a peep.

At best, we can say that Putin is straddling the fence, and playing us for a fool. It seems he wants to give the U.S. a minimum of what we want in order to get a maximum of what he wants. He covets membership in the World Trade Organization, yet seems content to allow Iran and Iraq to operate as thugs. Is his ultimate goal to increase Russia's stature, and to re-enter superpower status?

The Russian president is sending mixed signals.

He willingly increases his stature with terrorists, but not so with freedom-loving people around the world.