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MANKIND'S ONLY ALTERNATIVE SINCE 1997

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[The Day America's Empire Died](#)  
 By Mark Ames



*(This article was published in the final issue of Radar magazine, which was bought out and shuttered just as the issue went to print in late September.)*

**Tskhinvali, South Ossetia** — On the sunny afternoon of August 14, a Russian army colonel named Igor Konashenko is standing triumphantly at a street corner at the northern edge of Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, his forearm bandaged from a minor battle injury. The spot marks the furthest point of the Georgian army's advance before it was summarily crushed by the Russians a few days earlier. "Twelve Georgian battalions invaded Tskhinvali, backed by columns of tanks, armored personal carriers, jets, and helicopters," he says, happily waving at the wreckage, craters, and bombed-out buildings around us. "You see how well they fought, with all their great American training — they abandoned their tanks in the heat of the battle and fled."

Konashenko pulls a green compass out of his shirt pocket and opens it. It's a U.S. military model. "This is a little trophy — a gift from one of my soldiers," he says. "Everything that the Georgians left behind, I mean everything, was American. All the guns, grenades, uniforms, boots, food rations — they just left it all. Our boys stuffed themselves on the food," he adds slyly. "It was tasty." The booty, according to Konashenko, also included 65 intact tanks outfitted with the latest NATO and American (as well as Israeli) technology.



Technically, we are standing within the borders of Georgia, which over the last five years has gone from being an ally to the United States to a neocon proxy regime. But there are no Georgians to be seen in this breakaway region — not unless you count the bloated corpses still lying in the dirt roads. Most of the 70,000 or so people who live in South Ossetia never liked the idea of being part of Georgia. During the violent land scramble that occurred after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Ossetians found themselves cut off from their ethnic kin in North Ossetia, which remained part of Russia. The Russians, who've had a small peacekeeping force here since 1992, managed to keep the brewing conflicts on ice for the last 15 years. But in the meantime, the positions of everyone involved hardened. The Georgians weren't happy about the idea of losing a big chunk of territory. The Ossetians, an ethnic Persian tribe, were more adamant than ever about joining Russia, their traditional ally and protector.

The tense but relatively stable situation blew up late in the evening of August 7, when on the order of president Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's army swept into South Ossetia, leveling much of Tskhinvali and surrounding villages and sending some 30,000 refugees fleeing north into Russia. Within hours, Russia's de facto czar Vladimir Putin counterattacked — some say he'd set a trap — and by the end of that long weekend the Georgians were in panicked retreat. The Russian army then pushed straight through South Ossetia and deep into Georgia proper, halting less than an hour's drive from Saakashvili's luxurious palace. All around me is evidence of a rout. A Georgian T-72 tank turret is wedged into the side of a local university building, projecting from the concrete like a cookie pressed into ice cream. Fifty yards away you can see the remains of the vehicle that the orphaned turret originally was part of: just a few charred parts around a hole in the street, and a section of tread lying flat on the sidewalk. Russian tanks now patrol the city unopposed, each one as loud as an Einstzende Neubauten concert, clouding the air with leaded exhaust as they rumble past us.



But listening to Colonel Konashenko, it becomes clear to me that I'm looking at more than just the smoldering remains of battle in an obscure regional war: This spot is ground zero for an epic historical shift. The dead tanks are American-upgraded, as are the spent 40mm grenade shells that one spetsnaz soldier shows me. The bloated bodies on the ground are American-trained Georgian soldiers who have been stripped of their American-issue uniforms. And yet, there is no American cavalry on the way. For years now, everyone from Pat Buchanan to hybrid-powered hippies have been warning that America would suddenly find itself on a historical downslope from having been too reckless, too profligate, and too arrogant as an unopposed superpower. Even decent patriotic folk were starting to worry that America was suffering from a classic case of Celebrity Personality Disorder, becoming a nation of Tom Cruise party-dicks dancing in our socks over every corner and every culture in the world, lip-synching about freedom as we plunged headfirst into as much risky business as we could mismanage. And now, bleeding money from endless wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, we're a sick giant hooked on ever-pricier doses of oil paid for with a currency few people want anymore. In the history books of the future, I would wager that this very spot in Tskhinvali will be remembered as both the geographic highwater mark of the American empire, and the place where it all started to fall apart.



### GEORGIA'S MAIN HIGHWAY FROM TBLISI TO THE INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

I first visited Georgia in 2002 to cover the arrival of American military advisers. At the time, the American empire was riding high. A decade after the Soviet Union's collapse, Russia seemed to be devolving into an anarchic and corrupt failed state, while the U.S. just kept getting stronger. Within months of President George W. Bush's swearing-in, *Time* ran a column boasting that America didn't need to accommodate Russia anymore because it had become "the dominant power in the world, more dominant than any since Rome." That same year we invaded Afghanistan without breaking a sweat. *The New York Times* magazine proclaimed: "The American Empire: Get Used to It." A new word, hyperpower, was being used to describe our history-warping supremacy.

The military advisers were dispatched to Georgia ostensibly to train that country's forces to fight local Al Qaeda cells, which everyone knew didn't exist. In reality, we were training them for key imperial outsourcing duties. Georgia would do for the American Empire what Mumbai call centers did for Delta Airlines: deliver greater returns at a fraction of the cost. They became a flagship franchise of America Inc. It made sense for the Georgians, too: Their erratic and occasionally violent neighbor Russia wouldn't fuck with them, because fucking with them would be fucking with us — and nobody would dare to do that.

The imperial masterminds who fixated on Georgia as an outsourcing project must have figured we'd score a two-fer by simultaneously winning strategic control of the untapped oil in the region and also managing to stick a giant bug up the raw southern rim of our decrepit old rival Russia.

To enact this plan, America deftly organized and orchestrated the so-called Rose Revolution, which I witnessed in Tblisi in 2003. Saakashvili's predecessor, Eduard Shevardnadze, was judged unreliable, so in a multilayered soft putsch that used every lever of influence at our disposal, the U.S. replaced him with Saakashvili, a Columbia-educated hothead who speaks perfect neocon. In the Western media, the Rose Revolution was portrayed as 1776 redux (starring Saakashvili as George Washington with a permanent five o'clock shadow). A more perfect vassal for George W. Bush's foreign policy could not have been found than "Misha," as he is fondly known. He stacked his cabinet with young right-wing fanatics, and made sure he had a coterie of mountain-biking American advisers with him at all times. This crew included John McCain's chief foreign policy adviser Randy Scheunemann, whom Misha paid more than \$1 million in lobbying fees.



This project in Georgia was just a high-profile example of a broader Bush strategy. All around Russia's southern border, America laid claim to former Soviet domains. After 9/11, Putin infuriated many of his army commanders and security chiefs by agreeing to let the U.S. set up bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan for the Afghan invasion. Once the Taliban was removed from power, America decided that it

felt like staying. After all, who was going stop us? Given the sorry state of their affairs, the Russians certainly weren't. So by 2002, Putin was stuck with American pie dripping down his cadaverous bloodless face. But after years in which Russia rebuilt itself on the back of soaring commodity prices (today it's the world's largest producer of oil), our advantages in global power politics have started to tilt Putin's way. Slowly and quietly he got American forces thrown out of Uzbekistan and all but sidelined in Kyrgyzstan. And then, here in Georgia, he seized the opportunity to really hammer home his point.

During my visit to Georgia in 2003, if someone had told me that in five years American military advisers would be hightailing it from their main base in Vasiani to avoid getting slaughtered by advancing Russian forces, I would have slapped him with a rubber chicken for insulting my intelligence. Yet there they were: gasping for air in the lobby of the Tbilisi Sheraton, insisting off the record that the conflict was all the Georgians' fault, not theirs.



Why Misha decided to attack is still a mystery. He claims he was forced to level Tskhinvali to preempt a Russian invasion, but that doesn't make military sense, and has since been debunked by both Georgians and OSCE monitors on the ground; others believe that he struck because, with Bush on his way out, he thought this would be his last chance to regain control of South Ossetia. Another theory popular among journalists and pundits is that the notoriously "hotheaded" (some would say "mentally unstable") Saakashvili was suckered into his doomed invasion by a clever Russian ruse, part of Putin's plan to punish the West for recognizing Kosovo and other crimes of imperial insensitivity. Personally, I'd vote for number two. (Putin has offered an alternative hypothesis: that Misha intentionally sparked a war in order to boost John McCain's prospects in the U.S. election.)



Prior to the offensive of August 7, Georgians cut off Russian television and Internet sites in South Ossetia, then rained Grad rockets and artillery on the capital and surrounding villages. The early-hours blitz was, as one Ossetian told me the day before, "shock and awe." At least half the population fled into Russia. People I spoke to in the refugee camps, mostly women, were still in a daze — they told of fleeing their burning villages under fire, of Georgians raping and murdering, of grenades thrown into civilian bomb shelters, of tanks running over children. (It was impossible to corroborate these individual stories, as is generally the case in trying to sift fact from inflamed rumor in refugee camps.)

Reliable casualty counts for the broader conflict are still all but impossible to get, but as of late August the Russians admit having lost 64 soldiers, and the Georgians a combined 215 soldiers and civilians. In both cases, the real number is probably much higher. On the civilian

front, Ossetian sources claim that 1,500 were killed in the Georgian assault — Putin called it a “genocide” — but many Westerners dismiss that figure.

Privately, however, American advisers and defeated Georgian commanders admit to “total defeat.” Indeed, Arkady Ostrovsky of the *Economist*, a British reporter who has long been close to Saakashvili, told me that on the day of the cease-fire, the Georgian leader spoke of shooting himself, and was only dissuaded when word came of a supportive statement by Condi Rice. “It was sad to watch,” Ostrovsky told me. “I should have been more critical of Saakashvili back when it might have counted. A lot of us should have.”

That’s exactly the kind of full-spectrum smackdown the Russians were aiming for. And Konashenko wants us all to see it, so he offers to take me and some other reporters to the city of Gori in occupied Georgia. Russia seized control of the city at the end of hostilities, essentially cutting its foe in two and leaving it exposed to Vladimir Putin’s whims. “We’ll show you Gori — the city is spotless,” Konashenko says cheerfully. “We could have destroyed it, but we didn’t. Of course, there’s a little bit of damage here and there”

The next morning, I head toward Georgia in the back of a Russian army truck, winding through the countryside of South Ossetia. Many villages have been burned and completely leveled. In the minority ethnic- Georgian communities, the sour odor of death hangs in the air, as those who survived the Ossetians’ reprisal attacks had little time to bury their dead friends and relatives.



#### AMES POURING SWEAT LOCKED INSIDE A RUSSIAN APC WITH REPORTERS

When we arrive in Gori, the locals seem unnerved by our presence. They shy away as aggressive reporters point cameras and pursue them along the cobblestone streets for a quote. At first, some say that they are grateful that the Russian forces are there to protect them from marauding Ossetian and Chechen irregulars, who had swept through parts of Georgia murdering civilians and looting homes before the Russians arrived. After a half hour, the Georgians we talk with get used to our presence. A few summon the nerve to quietly pull me aside and whisper things like, “Are the Russians ever going to leave?” and “We don’t have any information here. Is this going to be Russian territory forever?”

In Gori’s vast central square there is shattered glass on the sidewalks, but as Konashenko promised, the city is largely intact. It is also starkly empty, as if a virus or neutron bomb had wiped out the civilian population. Most of the city’s inhabitants have long since fled to Tbilisi, along with the soldiers.

As we hop out of the army trucks, one of the Russian commanders points to a limp banner flying at half-mast over the polished-granite administration building on the far side of the square, “You see?” he says. “The Georgian flag is still flying. This is Georgian territory — we’re not annexing it like the media says.” This kind of boast, conquering a country and then making a big noble show of respecting its sovereignty, was something that had once been reserved for America’s forces. How quickly history has turned here.

The other Western journalists fan out for some atrocity hunting, digging for signs that the Russians might have dropped a cluster bomb or massacred civilians. The foreign-desk editors back home have been demanding proof of Russian evil, after largely ignoring Georgia’s war crimes in South Ossetia. It’s a sordid business, but the reporters are just following orders.

After an hour in the 90-degree heat, I head over to the city’s central square, where I stumble across a stunning spectacle: dozens of Russian soldiers doing a funky-chicken victory dance in the Georgian end zone. They’re clowning around euphorically, shooting souvenir photos of each other in front of the administration building and the statue of Stalin (Gori’s most famous native son) while their commanders lean back and laugh. I approach Lieutenant Colonel Andrei Bobrun, assistant commander of the Russian land forces’ North Caucasus Military District — the roughest neighborhood in Western Eurasia — and ask him how he feels now, as a victorious military leader in a proxy war with America.

“I have never been so proud of Russia — magnificent Russia!” Bobrun crows, an AK strapped over his shoulder. “For twenty years we just talked and talked, blabbed and blabbed, complained and complained. But we did nothing, while America ran wild and took everything it could. Twenty years of empty talk. Now Russia is back. And you see how great Russia is. Look around you — we’re not trying to annex this land. What the fuck do I need Georgia for? Russia could keep this, but what for? Hell, we could conquer the whole world if we wanted to. That’s a fact. It was Russia that saved Europe from Genghis Khan. Russia could have taken India and the Middle East. We could take anything — we took Alaska, we took California. There is nothing that Russia could not take, and now the world is being reminded again.”

“Why did you give California back?” I asked. It has always baffled me why a country would abandon prime coastal real estate for the frozen swamps of Siberia — I always assumed it was because the Russians were ashamed when they found themselves holding onto a chunk of this planet as perfect as California: like B-list nerds who successfully crash a Vanity Fair Oscar party, but within minutes of their little triumph, skulk out of the tent out of sheer embarrassment, knowing they never belonged there in the first place.

“We gave it all back because we don’t need it,” Borisov boasted, puffing out his chest. “Russia has enough land, what the hell do we need more for. But if others want to start something, this is what will happen. Russia is back, and I am so proud.”

As the day wore on, the Kremlin press pool organizers finally rounded us up, and we headed back again along the same victory trail. It was on this second visit to ruins of Tskhinvali, as dusk approached and the violence seemed to already acquire a kind of abstract tone, that I started to realize that I was looking at something much bigger than the current debate about Russian aggression or who was more guilty of what — pulling the camera much farther back on this scene, I understood that I was looking at the first ruins of America’s imperial decline. It’s not an easy thing to spot. It took years after the real collapse for Russians to finally accept that awful reality, and to adjust accordingly, first by retrenching, not overplaying an empty hand, slowly building up without making any loud noises while America ran wild around the world bankrupting itself and bleeding dry.



**GEORGIAN SOLDIER ON THE STREETS OF TSKHINVALI (PHOTO: AMES)**

And now it’s over for us. That’s clear on the ground. But it will be years before America’s political elite even begins to grasp this fact. In the meantime, Russia is drunk on its victory and the possibilities that it might imply, sending its recently-independent neighbors into a kind of frenzied animal panic. Experience has taught them that it’s moments like these when Russia’s near abroad becomes, once again, a blood-soaked doormat in the violent epochal shifts — history never stopped here, it just froze up for a decade or so. And now it’s thawing, bringing with it the familiar stench of bloated bodies, burned rubble, and the sour sweat of Russian infantry.

We have entered a dangerous moment in history — America in decline is reacting hysterically, woofing and screeching and throwing a tantrum, desperate to prove that it still has teeth. Which it does — but not in the old dominant way that America wants or believes itself to be. History shows that it’s at this moment, tipping into decline and humiliation, when the worst decisions are made, so idiotically destructive that they’ll make the Iraq campaign look like a mere training exercise fender-bender by comparison.

Russia, meanwhile, is as high as a Hollywood speedballer from its victory. Putting the two together in the same room — speedballing Russia and violently bad-tripping America — is a recipe for serious disaster. If we’re lucky, we’ll survive the humiliating decline and settle into the new reality without causing too much damage to ourselves or the rest of the world. But when that awful moment arrives where the cognitive dissonance snaps hard, it will be an epic struggle to come to our senses in time to prevent the William Kristols, Max Boots and Robert Kagans from leading us into a nuclear holocaust which, they will assure us, we can win against Russia, thanks to our technological superiority. If only we have the will, they’ll tell us, we can win once and for all.

*This version was first posted online at [Alternet](#). Mark Ames is the author of [Going Postal: Rage, Murder and Rebellion from Reagan’s Workplaces to Clinton’s Columbine](#).*