

# The New Criterion

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## What Donald should have said . . .

*by James Bowman*



*Donald Trump and Bill O'Reilly. Photo courtesy of Fox News (via YouTube)*

Even Donald Trump's supporters, if there are any left, seem to be joining in the chorus of derision about his reply to Bill O'Reilly's assertion that the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, is a "killer." Mr. Trump had just said that he respected Mr. Putin, and could easily have replied: "What has that got to do with it? He's the leader of a nuclear-armed superpower with whom it is overwhelmingly in our interest to get along as best we can. That's the relevant fact here—the 'alternative fact,' if you like—which is no less a fact for that. It can't be our major concern what he does to his domestic political opponents, which is more or less what Russian autocrats of all types have always done."

Instead, you will remember, he said this: "There are a lot of killers. You think our country's so innocent?" These words were immediately seized upon by the hostile, and even much of the hitherto slightly friendly media as drawing a moral equivalence between our own, American system—about which many in the outraged media have often said similar or worse things—and the Russian one. Well, you can see how they would say such a thing. But it appears not to have occurred to anybody that making moral comparisons of *any* kind between countries might not be the best way to conduct diplomacy (even TV diplomacy of the kind favored by Mr. Trump).

The media are presumably longing for the good old days when Jimmy Carter conducted foreign relations as an opportunity for preaching the Democratic gospel of “human rights.” But one needn’t have anything against human rights to point out that this is not a very effective way even of promoting human rights, let alone increasing American influence in the world, which must be the pre-requisite of such promotion. Mr. Carter was ahead of his time, however: the first major political figure to treat virtue-signaling as the object of political action—or, as it is at the moment, of political re-action. Mr. Trump must be surprised to learn how few on the Left want to get anything done anymore. Not even to make America great again. All they want to do is boast to the world about how great *they* are.

Here are a few more words I’d like to put into the mouth of the president in reply to Mr. O’Reilly’s “killer” comment.

“So what am I supposed to do about it? The President of the United States is not the confessor and spiritual guide to the leaders of other nations, still less their prosecutor or judge. That’s not how the world works, has ever worked or will ever work. The job of the president is to take the world as he finds it and try to make, out of that, the best deals for his country that he can. It’s not, as you smug elitists of the media seem to think, to be the virtue-signalers-in-chief to the rest of the world, eternally reminding them of how much better he is—or we fine fellows are who have just elected him— than they are. What kind of diplomacy is that? I’ll tell you: no diplomacy at all, but just moral triumphalism and mental masturbation to make us feel good about ourselves. It’s diplomacy as therapy and self-help.

“What, Mr. O’Reilly, do you think Russia, let alone the rest of the world, cares for our fine moral feelings of disapproval for their actions? In the international arena, our stern condemnations will always sound like mere hypocrisy, since it will always be assumed that, whatever we say, we will be doing as others do and promoting our own interests by any means necessary. Why, then, bother to claim to be better than other people, even if we are better? Diplomacy is always going to be better served by reverse hypocrisy, by pretending to be worse than we are, so that people around the world will be more inclined to take our words seriously and not simply assume that we are engaged in self-puffery every time we open our mouths. With that in mind, I would ask you this question: You think our country’s so innocent?”

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