

Putin's message

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Why would Russian President Vladimir Putin bestow his country's highest award on a Cold War spy, the American-born George Koval, who betrayed secrets of the Manhattan Project to Stalin's Soviet Union? Two answers spring readily to mind, neither of which is reassuring about where Putin's Russia is heading.

First, Putin had to know that honoring Koval, who was made a "Hero of the Russian Federation," half a century after his treason to the United States would constitute a thumb in the eye of increasingly shaky U.S.-Russian relations. Second, by bestowing Russia's highest honor on a spy, ex-KGB agent Putin sent an unmistakable message about the values now ascendant in his new Russia. On both counts, this is bad news for the West in general and the United States in particular.

Putin's Russia is now a country with the trappings of democracy undergirded by an increasingly autocratic Kremlin. Much of the press is effectively muzzled, Putin loyalists control much of the economy, election outcomes are predictable and dissident journalist and out-of-favor entrepreneurs sometimes end up murdered. In foreign policy, Putin's Russia seems bent on intimidating Europe, obstructing U.S. interests and restoring at least a measure of the Kremlin's former geopolitical reach.

All this is hardly what the West hoped for when the Soviet Union and its rotting ideology collapsed in 1991. If, indeed, Putin's new Russia is to be more thuggish than democratic, America and its allies must recognize reality and respond accordingly; not with a new Cold War, but certainly a more wary relationship with Moscow.

George Koval died last year in Russia in his 90s. His parents had emigrated from Russia to America. Koval repaid the generosity extended to his family by betraying his country, working for Soviet military intelligence and handing atomic bomb secrets to Stalin's tyranny. If that makes Koval a "Hero of the Russian Federation," it's time for a long second look at what Putin is building.

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