Opinion

NCR Voices



A portrait of the late Yevgeny Prigozhin, head of the Wagner mercenary group, lays at an informal memorial in St. Petersburg, Russia, Aug. 24. (AP Photo/Dmitri Lovetsky)



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On the night of May 4, 1692, John Churchill, the earl (later duke) of Marlborough, was arrested on the charge of high treason, and sent to the Tower of London. It was a significant milestone in the progressive march of civilization.

The spring of 1692 was marked by fears of an imminent sea battle and possible invasion that swept England. Four years earlier, in 1688, the Catholic King James II had been deposed and the Protestant champion, William of Orange, landed in England to claim the English crown with his wife, Queen Mary, James' daughter.

Marlborough had once been a close aide to James, but had switched sides during the so-called Glorious Revolution, and swore allegiance to the Protestant succession. Like many people who switch sides, he had enemies all around. In the charged atmosphere of 1692, when a forged document appeared that seemed to indicate Marlborough and others were betraying William, the earl was sent to the Tower.

Why was this a step forward? James' father, King Charles I, was beheaded in 1639 when he lost power to the Roundheads. Charles' grandmother, Mary Queen of Scots, had been beheaded the previous century. The shift from execution to imprisonment for political opponents was a step forward.

In the 18th century, imprisoning those who had lost political power would also come to be seen as barbaric. In 1761, when William Pitt was forced to resign as prime minister, he was given a peerage.

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This history came to mind last week as the television showed a plane falling from the sky northwest of Moscow. A jet containing Yevgeni Prigozhin, head of the Wagner mercenary group, apparently blew up in flight, killing not only Prigozhin but other top leaders of the group that briefly mutinied in June.

At the time of the mutiny, Putin's response seemed muted, as if he had been taken by surprise entirely. The apparent assassination of Prigozhin demonstrates that Putin learned the age-old lesson: Vengeance tastes best when it is served cold.

To be sure, Prigozhin was no hero. He was a murderous thug. The restauranteur-turned-mercenary's Wagner group was implicated in the murder of 500 innocent civilians last year in Mali and of torturing POWs in Ukraine. The videotaped torture and murder of a Syrian Army deserter, Hamadi Bouta, by Wagner mercenaries in 2017 was used as a PR and recruitment tool by the group.

They were vicious but not smart. Had none of the seven Wagner leaders who boarded the plane read about the Night of the Long Knives, when Hitler lured the leadership of the SA, a paramilitary group, to a remote Bavarian resort and killed them off in a single night? Didn't the Wagner leaders think it odd they were all going on the same plane?

Prigozhin's followers are figuring out how to proceed. They aren't going to end up at a Pax Christi meeting. No one knows what the demise of Prigozhin and the other Wagner group leaders means for the mercenaries' involvement in Africa or Syria. So long as someone is willing to pay top ruble, some other mercenary will fill the vacuum in leadership that opened up when Prighozin's plane fell to earth.

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The alleged assassination was not merely payback by Putin. It was intended to send a message.

"Anyone who displays disloyalty will be seen by the state as an enemy that needs to be liquidated," one well-connected Moscow businessman told The Washington Post. "Everyone will believe that this was carried out on the orders of the czar. We may never know whether this is true or not. But it has frightened everyone."

Of course, Putin denies any responsibility for the killing.

Disassociating the loss of political power from political violence is a civilizational achievement. It is one of the things that distinguishes an enlightened regime from a barbaric one. The achievement takes place in different countries at different times. When Pitt was made the earl of Chatham, the violence of the French Revolution was still decades in the future. In Russia, state-sponsored violence was one point of continuity between the Tsarist and Soviet regimes.

Americans who dismiss the danger posed by the rise in political violence in our country would do well to remember that civilizations do not only improve, they decline. They are capable of great achievements and overcoming great atrocities, but are never immune from the prospect of falling back into barbaric ones.

"The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice," the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. famously said. Sometimes that arc is very long indeed.