



Georgias on My Mind

by Jonathan Aitken

FROM ATLANTA, GEORGIA, TO TBILISI, GEORGIA, is a long journey across continents, cultures, and huge divides of wealth. Yet having recently visited both capitals I can also say that both Georgias have much in common in matters of faith, hope, and politics.

To begin with politics: The country of Georgia, a small but fiercely nationalistic former Soviet republic, probably contains a larger percentage of enthusiasts for George W. Bush than you can find today in any American state. The 43rd president came to Tbilisi in 2005. He was given a rapturous welcome, a main street named after him, and an endorsement of his foreign policy that was far more positive and practical than the usual platitudes in diplomatic communiqués issued at the end of presidential visits.

In response to the courtship from the Bush administration, which included a \$4 billion aid package, Georgia has this year doubled its troops in Iraq to 5,000, making it the coalition's fifth largest military supporter. It is applying to join NATO. It has had several showdowns with Russia, most recently lodging a formal complaint to the UN Security Council against President Putin's government for violating Georgian territory in an unprovoked missile attack.

This episode deserves the attention of all those who are becoming concerned about the Kremlin's increasing

tendency to flex its military muscles against its smaller neighbors. What happened was that on August 6, two Sukhoi SU34 attack aircraft entered Georgian airspace. When they were some 40 miles west of the capital, Tbilisi, they performed provocative maneuvers above the village of Tseluban; which climaxed with one of the fighter bombers firing an air-to-ground missile. It left a 16-foot crater in a field but failed to explode. From its Cyrillic markings and other data, the unexploded bomb was easily identified by independent experts as a 1,000-kg precision-guided Russian-manufactured missile. Kremlin denials of the episode, which included the unusual suggestion that the Georgians had attacked themselves, seem incredible in the light of the evidence from radar data, photographs, and the missile itself.

Despite the clarity of the facts, the purpose of the Russian attack remains obscure. For what could possibly be the military or political purpose in firing a missile at a field near an obscure village of no strategic value?

My Georgian friends were full of explanations. Some say that the Russians missed their real target, which was a camouflaged military tracking station located on the other side of the village. Others argue that it was a tit-for-tat response to the Georgian government's expulsion of four Russian soldiers accused of spying a few months earlier. Another theory is that

with Russia-Georgia relations at an all-time low, Putin wants to ratchet up pressure on his irritatingly pro-American neighbor with turns of the screw that have already included the banning of Georgia's wine imports, expulsions of Georgians living in Russia, breaking off diplomatic relations, and severing most trade and transport links. But perhaps the most convincing explanation was given to me by a confidant of Georgia's 38-year-old president, Mikheil Saakashvili: "We are being harassed and bullied by the Russians because of our values," he said. "We have real democracy here and a free press. We want to join the EU and NATO. We are striving to be an independent nation embracing Western institutions and values. That is why the Russians are threatening us."

THIS TALK OF VALUES resonated with me because several weeks before the missile attack I had traveled to Georgia to lead a seminar on values and character. This was an initiative organized by the Trinity Forum, a faith-based discussion group that through its forums seeks to engage leaders and future leaders in the ethical, personal, moral, and spiritual issues in their lives. In Tbilisi our local supporters had convened a group of some 30 young government ministers, civil servants, academics, editors, businessmen, and journalists. We spent a day and a half discussing an anthology of readings, compiled by Dr. Os Guinness, with the title *When No One Sees: The Importance of Character in an Age of Image*.

I was surprised by the eagerness with which this group of talented young English-speaking Georgians was willing to engage in a curriculum that ranged across the writings of Plato, Machiavelli, Oscar Wilde, Abraham Lincoln, Augustine, C. S. Lewis, Robert Bolt, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I was equally delighted when I lectured the following day on "Character in Leadership: A Study of the Careers and Characters of President Richard Nixon and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher." Perhaps the greatest surprise was that my 45-minute address to the Georgian Institute of Leadership was followed by over two hours of intense questioning by a student body (of all ages) that was clearly hungry to absorb lessons on the strengths and weaknesses of Western democracy. One student explained the intensity of the Q&A period over coffee afterwards: "You see, we really don't have a value system of our own," he said. "We were brought up on Communist values which we now know were wrong and useless. We haven't replaced them with a proper understanding of Western values—which sometimes confuse us."

Several times during my visit I asked whether spiritual values played any part in the lives of the people. It seemed likely that this would be so since Georgia is one of the world's oldest Christian nations,

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with a glorious ecclesiastical heritage of churches and monasteries. Today approximately 70 percent of Georgia's 4 million people belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church and only 15 percent are Muslims. Yet the majority of those who profess any kind of faith are purely nominal in their beliefs. This is now a predominantly secular country.

On the other hand, there is a small but rising younger generation of Christian leaders who are deeply committed to their faith. Two of them were the organizers of our Trinity Forum initiative. One was a multi-millionaire real estate developer, Malhaz Datukshvili. Early one morning he took me up a mountain to a 7th-century monastery where we lit candles and prayed together. Another was the academic head of the Georgian Institute of Leadership, Gia Maishvili, also a young man of faith and prayer. In 21st-century Georgia the laborers may be few, but I saw many reasons for optimism that the harvest in the new generation may yet be a good one.

In a different Georgia 5,000 miles west of Tbilisi this July, I found myself touring the International Christian Resources Exhibition in Atlanta. It was formerly known as the Christian Book Fair. Publishers of Bibles exhibit there. On one of their stands I happened to see a copy of a Bible in Georgian. "How many of these do you publish?" I asked the salesman. "We've just done a print run of 20,000," he replied. "There's a big demand for the Word out there, apparently." I was pleased but not surprised to hear it, for Georgia deserves support at the spiritual as well as the political level of international relations. ❧

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