



P E R S P E C T I V E S

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Irish Fishing vs. Russian Force

A Perspective on Masculinity

A major battle broke out between a bunch of Irish fishermen from County Cork Ireland, and the pride of the Russian navy. You may have missed the news story, so it is worth spending some time looking at what happened, why, and what lessons we can take away from the exchange.

The story begins with a major Russian naval armada scheduling full-scale war games in international waters off the Irish coast. That seems like a relatively normal activity in Russia's increasingly frequent use of military "exercises" to flex their military muscles. Think of the 115,000 troops massed as an "exercise" on the borders of Ukraine.

The "exercises" on land near Ukraine's border, and at sea off the Irish coast (read the United Kingdom's immediate neighborhood), are the type of muscle-flexing we'd expect of any autocrat. The sort of performative masculinity that a bare-chested, horseback riding, muscle-flexing, hockey-playing Russian president (dictator?) Vladimir Putin clearly relishes. He is the absolute poster boy for old-fashioned stereotypical images of domineering "maleness"—projected in uniquely overstated displays of aggressive masculinity. This model of being "strong" has been the cornerstone of the paternalistic masculinity that has over the centuries led to countless wars and other acts of aggression time and again.

There is no bigger "bully" on today's global stage than Putin, and he wants everyone to know it. He is constantly telegraphing this exaggerated masculine stereotype to his own people as well as to every other leader on the world stage. Putin's anachronistic displays of manliness would be comical if they hadn't already proved so deadly. For example, in the Donbas region of Ukraine over 10,000 have died, and continue to die currently, as a direct result of his aggression. And let's not forget how Russia already seized by military force the entire Crimea from Ukraine: the first time since Hitler's World War II aggression that a European nation's borders were altered by military force. Yes, Putin is a dangerous masculine ego operating on the world stage with little restraint on him.

Contrast that with Patrick Murphy, a humble Irish fisherman and the chief executive of the Irish South and West Fish Producers Organization. When confronted by Putin's "war games" the naval armada planned to operate right in Murphy's fishing grounds, he issued an ultimatum to Putin that few thought would succeed: when fishing season legally opened on the first of February, he intended to fish his ancestral fishing grounds 150 miles offshore of Cork where his boats were moored. Russian war games or not, when the fishing season opened, he and his fellow fishermen would be heading out.

Murphy's action was to protest non-violently against a massive, unrestrained military force. He had no weapons. His ship was tiny, but still, he was willing to sail into the midst of Russian warships, engaged in a "game" being directed by a megalomaniacal, chest-thumping dictator, seeking to display his "masculine" ability to restrict anyone, anywhere from resisting his command.

As negotiations broke down between the Irish government and Moscow, Murphy declared to Politico on January 25:

“Our boats will be going out to that area on the first of February to go fishing...When one boat needs to return to port, another will head out so there is a continuous presence on the water. If that is in proximity to where the [military] exercise is going, we are expecting that the Russian naval services will abide by the anti-collision regulations.”

Politico reported that having boats “continuously in the exercise waters, the fishermen would—peacefully—prevent the Russians from conducting the exercise.”

The military name for what Murphy was fighting is “Russian grey-zone aggression”. In this case, an outrageous re-construction of something even more disproportionate than David’s run in with Goliath. There is also a military term to describe this non-violent approach to overcoming aggression, which Murphy and his fishing cohort had probably never heard of even though they skillfully deployed it. It’s called “asymmetric deterrence.” Murphy was no fool. He understood that acting aggressively toward the Russian navy would only give them an excuse to do damage to their fishing vessels. His deterrence was simply his unarmed presence in the field.

Murphy knew what was at stake for his family and the entire fishing community of Cork. He had to fish. It is the only way he and the other fisherman have to feed their respective families. In his own words, “This is the livelihoods of fishermen and fishing families all around the coastline here...” He analogized his situation the way a simple farmer would anywhere in the world, “This is our ground,” said Murphy, “this is our farm, this is where we earn our living. Why should somebody be able to come in and do that in our waters?”

In the end, it was Putin and the Russian navy who flinched. Days before the start of the season, Russia announced it was moving its war games to a different location.

In seeing the conflict this way, Murphy was demonstrating a very different type of masculinity than what Putin packages and sells. He is taking the role of a nurturing husband and father who needs to take care of his family and is willing to put his own life on the line to do it. That level of nurturing, devoid of any testosterone-driven machismo, is the very antithesis of Putin’s chest-thumping, strongman, posturing.

A man braving the elements and a harsh environment to feed his family out of a sense of duty to them and his “tribe” are as old as the first “caveman”. It is brave conduct borne of a sense of responsibility regardless of the danger. That’s authentic masculinity.

Thank you, Patrick Murphy, for demonstrating the contrast of your way of being male with that of a man who would be Czar—at any cost. The latter is merely a caricature of manhood, that only a true bully would choose over authentic strength. Thank you, Mr. Murphy, for demonstrating this truly alternative expression of healthy masculinity.

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