

2020

## Trump, West Point, and Immortan Joe

Authoritarians and their fetish for physical strength.

by JONATHAN V. LAST · JUNE 15, 2020 5:30 AM

Do you remember this video?



Way back when, Americans regarded Vladimir Putin as something of a clown. He was the guy who performed “Blueberry Hill” and allowed himself to be filmed “[sparring](#)” with the Russian national judo team. There was the [shirtless horseback riding](#). And of course, the skin diving.

My favorite moment of Putin propaganda was when Vlad went for a swim in the Black Sea and —by total coincidence!—found two 6th Century Greek urns at the bottom and then—by an even greater coincidence!—was photographed as he emerged from the surf, like Neptune, or King Triton, or Black Manta.



Vladimir Putin holds two ancient amphorae he found while scuba diving in Taman Bay as he visits an underwater archaeological site at Phanagoria on August 10, 2011. (ALEXEY DRUZHININ/AFP via Getty Images)

Do you remember how entertaining this was? We all laughed at the ridiculousness of it. How could Putin think that these obviously staged pieces of buffoonery would convince the Russian people of his physical prowess?

And of course, the joke was on us. Because the point of these stunts wasn’t to convince Russians that Vladimir Putin was an amazing physical specimen. The point was to instruct Russians that Vladimir Putin could say whatever he wanted—no matter how patently absurd. Because he knew it was BS. And they knew it was BS. And he *knew* that they knew.

But the Russian people would go along with it anyway. Because he was powerful and they were weak. It was a display of dominance over the very idea of truth.

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