Mr. President, I have

spoken often about Vladimir Putin’s

‘‘creeping coup’’ against the forces of

democracy and market capitalism in

Russia. It is with regret that I note

today that the coup is no longer creeping—

it is running full steam ahead.

President Putin is crassly using the

horrific Beslan attack to consolidate

autocratic rule. The people of Russia,

no safer because of the Kremlin’s power

grab, will ultimately pay the price.

Their freedom and the future of Russia

as a democratic state are at stake.

The terrorist attack on a school in

Beslan illustrated once again the ugly

face of extremism that will stop at

nothing—not even the deliberate killing

of schoolchildren—in pursuit of its

political aims. Like millions of others

around the world, this terrible event

moved my heart, and I offer my sympathy

to the families who have suffered

so grievously throughout the ordeal.

As with all deaths in terrorist attacks,

nothing anyone does can bring back

the lost. It is the duty of political leaders

to remember the fallen by taking

steps to ensure that such attacks do

not again occur.

And yet Mr. Putin chose the immediate

aftermath of this attack not to

address the root causes of Chechen terrorism,

nor to take meaningful steps

that would enhance the safety and security

of the Russian people. Instead,

he used the attack as an excuse—an excuse

to consolidate power and further

remove the Russian people from democracy.

President Putin has announced that,

because Russia faces terrorist threats,

significant changes within the government

are required. In the broadest

sense, he is right. In the midst of the

Beslan hostage standoff, government

officials repeatedly lied about what

was happening inside the school. The

military was unable to rescue people

and could not coordinate a response.

Furthermore, recent accounts indicate

that during the near-simultaneous

bombing of two Russian passenger aircraft,

the suicide bombers bribed their

way through checkpoints and onto the

planes. These problems stem from the

Kremlin’s lack of transparency, the

government’s lack of accountability,

and from widespread corruption and ineptitude.

And so a reasonable observer

might guess that the Kremlin seeks

governmental change that addresses

these problems. But a reasonable observer

would be wrong.

Instead, Mr. Putin has proposed

changes that would concentrate his

personal power and nearly extinguish

the embers of democracy in his country.

His allies have told journalists

that the president planned for months

to centralize political authority, and

merely took advantage of the Beslan

seizure to unveil the decision. And, as

the Washington Post has pointed out,

he has not removed security officials

who have failed to prevent repeated

terrorist strikes over several years.

The total effect of President Putin’s

new proposals would be to move Russia

a long way down the road to autocratic

rule. He would eliminate the popular

election of Russia’s 89 regional governors,

and instead appoint them himself.

He would eliminate independent

members of parliament, so that Russians

could vote only for political parties

rather than specific candidates,

Political parties—such as like the powerful

one headed by Mr. Putin—would

determine the slates. In last December’s

elections, district races accounted

for every independent and liberal

now serving in the Duma. Under

Mr. Putin’s plan, these races would be

abolished. I speak of all of these ideas

as ‘‘proposals’’ because the electoral

changes require parliamentary approval.

But that should not be difficult—

Mr. Putin’s party controls more

than two-thirds of the seats.

As shocking as these recent moves

are, they are simply the latest and

most egregious in a long string of antidemocratic

actions. In his time in

power, Mr. Putin has tried to eliminate

independent media by imposing restrictive

laws. These have led to the takeover

or arbitrary closing of all independent

national television channels.

The international media watchdog

group Reporters Without Borders

ranked 166 countries in its annual

World Press Freedom report. Russia

came in 148th. Last year, five reporters

were killed under suspicious circumstances,

and many reporters were

harassed, imprisoned, or physically

beaten.

But the media is not the only sector

to fear the wrath of an increasingly authoritarian

Kremlin. Mr. Putin has asserted

control over Russia’s energy industry

and used government power—including

imprisonment—against executives

who oppose him. The world has

watched with concern over his singlehanded

attempt to put Russia’s largest

privately held oil company out of business.

And, having lost their rights to

free speech and press and to engage

freely in an open market, the people of

Russia are now on their way to losing

the right to vote.

The Kremlin’s imposition of old-style

central control will not make the people

of Russia safer, it will merely curtail

their freedoms. But terrorism in

Russia does not result from too much

freedom. If anything, it stems in part

from the Kremlin’s reluctance to address

the legitimate aspirations of the

Chechen people for autonomy or independence.

Moving in the opposite direction,

increasing central control and decreasing

the say of citizens in how

their nation is governed, will do nothing

but aggravate the problems for

which Mr. Putin proposes solutions.

Sadly, many Russians have responded

to the Kremlin’s new proposals

not with outrage but with fearful plaudits.

Regional leaders—many of whom

may lose their jobs when they are replace

by Kremlin appointees—have

nevertheless praised Mr. Putin’s power

grab. The Tass news agency ran a headline

last week entitled ‘‘Regional leaders

hail Putin’s latest moves as a panacea

for all Russia’s ills.’’ This kind of

response is eerily familiar, a reminder

of the ridiculous propaganda fed to the

Russian people and the world by the

Soviet police state. I though that the

Russian people have moved beyond this

sordid past, throwing off the shackles

of oppression and ushering in a new

day of freedom. I will bet that the people

of Russia though the same. But obviously

Mr. Putin and the Kremlin

have other ideas.

As the world’s beacon of freedom and

democracy, the United States must

make clear our fierce opposition to the

path that Russia’s leadership is currently

on. As much as we value Russia’s

cooperation in other areas of our

bilateral relationship, they will have

little meaning if Moscow reverts to it

old ways. Mr. Putin, the world is

watching your next move.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence

of a quorum.