Mikheil Saakashvili, the President of Georgia, keeps late hours. During and after Georgia’s five-day war with Russia this August over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, he spent long days receiving Western dignitaries—Condoleezza Rice, Dick Cheney, Joe Biden, Nicolas Sarkozy, Angela Merkel—and he spent his nights rallying foreign journalists to Georgia’s side, often until the early hours of the morning. When I went to see him, at his office in Georgia’s new, unfinished Chancellery building, in the capital, Tbilisi, I was told to arrive “sometime after midnight.” Saakashvili’s adviser Daniel Kunin, an American in his late thirties whose salary, until recently, was paid by the United States Agency for International Development, was there to
meet me. Kunin is blond, boyish-looking, and usually cheerful, but his eyes were bloodshot. “I’m afraid it’s going to be a little wait,” he said.

Saakashvili’s office is lined with icons of Georgian Orthodox saints and book-shelves containing biographies of Stalin and the Kennedy family. On a side table is a history of the Winter War of 1939-40, in which greatly outnumbered Finnish forces thwarted a Soviet attempt to annex their country. Saakashvili entered the office after 2 A.M., wearing a dark suit and a loosened tie. He is forty years old—he was thirty-six when he became President, after leading Georgia’s Rose Revolution as a charismatic young democratic hero who, with a flower in his hand, confronted Georgia’s post-Soviet leader. He is known to all as Misha. Nearly six feet four, he has a lumbering gait, and his bulk and restless energy lend a curious awkwardness to his movements. “He can’t sit still,” one Georgian journalist told me. “There used to be a joke about it: people would take bets on how long he would sit down for—ten minutes, twelve minutes.”

“There is an A.F.P. story saying that Condi Rice will announce on Thursday certain measures,” Saakashvili said to Kunin. Saakashvili has staked his country’s security on its close relationship with the United States, and he had been hoping that the Bush Administration would take action against Russia for sending its forces into Georgia.

“Yeah,” Kunin said. “I don’t know what they are going to say, though.”

“They are going to bomb! From Alaska!” Saakashvili said, smiling. (Governor Sarah Palin had been chosen as John McCain’s running mate two weeks earlier.) “Or they are going to shoot their mooses!” Saakashvili asked an aide to bring a bottle of Georgian Saperavi wine and said that he hoped my
story wouldn’t turn out to be “an obituary.” In August, Russia’s Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, reportedly told President Nicolas Sarkozy, of France, that he wanted to see Saakashvili hanged “by the balls.” (To which Saakashvili replies, “He would not have enough rope.”)

The animosity between Saakashvili and Putin made the summer war look intensely personal. “People who have been in the room when Putin and Saakashvili have been together tell me that it has been electric with hatred,” Richard Holbrooke, the former Ambassador to the United Nations, told me. “It’s about a tiny man from the big country and a big man from the tiny country.” (Putin is about five feet six. He is said to have been particularly annoyed to hear his Tbilisi nickname, Lilli-Putin.) When he first became President, Saakashvili said, Putin “was pretty polite, and more and more he would be cynical and aggressive. The Putin I saw in 2006 already behaved like an emperor.” Putin, he said, never respected Georgian sovereignty. “Not only Georgia,” he added. “He always said Ukraine was not a real country.”

The Russians’”arrogance and their nastiness grew in exact proportion with oil prices, and with American problems in Iraq,” Saakashvili told me. But as much as Saakashvili talks about Russian high-handedness, the affront is felt on both sides. There is a sense in Russia, Masha Lipman, of the Carnegie Moscow Center, told me, “that Georgia is this tiny country, with a population of four and a half million and a weak economy, who have been provoking them in an arrogant manner because they have a bigger guy”—the United States —“behind them, and that their leader has been emboldened to talk arrogantly in this way.” The summer war, Lipman said, was seen as “a standoff against America, with the Russians victorious, as the Americans were unable to defend their client and ally.”
Despite the Russian bullying of Georgia, most foreign observers believe that Saakashvili has been needlessly provocative. On August 7th, Saakashvili ordered a strike on Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, after a week of escalating clashes between Georgian police and South Ossetian separatist forces, who have largely controlled the region since the fall of the Soviet Union. (South Ossetia, in the north-central part of the country, bordering Russia, has been a part of Georgia for centuries, but the Ossetians are ethnically distinct and have their own language.) Saakashvili maintains that the situation had become untenable, saying that he had received intelligence that a Russian invasion had begun, or was about to. He claims that he had no choice but to attack Tskhinvali—that it was either fight or surrender. The Russians deride this version of events, saying that Georgia acted as the aggressor, threatening the lives of Russian citizens in Tskhinvali and of Russian peacekeepers stationed there. In any event, the Russians reacted quickly and decisively, launching air attacks and sending columns of tanks into Georgia. The tanks rolled to a stop within twenty miles of Tbilisi.

Saakashvili seemed to be winning the propaganda war in August and September, as Western media and politicians denounced Russia’s incursion and its disproportionate use of force. In recent weeks, however, Western observers (and plenty of Georgian politicians, too) have become more skeptical of Saakashvili’s story. In late November, one of his former allies, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, who had briefly been Georgia’s Ambassador to Moscow, said during parliamentary hearings that he believed Saakashvili had been planning to invade South Ossetia for some time. When I spoke to Kitsmarishvili, before his appearance in parliament, he complained about the sense of being under siege that he felt Saakashvili had brought on Georgia. “I don’t want to live in the new Caucasian Israel,” he said. “I’d rather live in the new Caucasian Ireland. They still
have their problems in the north, but no one is scared.”
Saakashvili had dismissed his criticisms (“Erosi has always been all about the money,” he told me), and his government denied the charges. Still, even those who think that Russia simply seized on a pretext to invade now look at Saakashvili’s decision to attack Tskhinvali—an obviously provocative move, with no clear backup plan—and ask, What was he thinking?

Saakashvili’s mind is capacious but digressive. When talking about the summer war, he darts from the history of Soviet policy toward minorities to anecdotes about generals and presidents, and from bits about phone intercepts to citations from the Washington Post. In one conversation, he described the beauty of the women in Georgia’s mountainous Tusheti region (“They’re all blondes”); the layout of Tskhinvali (“It has only three streets: Moscow Street, Lenin Street, and Stalin Street”); and the characteristics of Georgian tribes (“I have two ancestors: South Ossetian—half wild, impulsive sometimes, maybe—but I am also Mingrelian. Mingrelians are all about compromise”).

“His mouth is like a machine gun,” one of his advisers told me. A Westerner who has worked closely with him said, “After you’ve had a discussion with him, you need to lie down. You need a drink.”

It was past 3 A.M., and Kunin was yawning. Saakashvili looked up and asked him why he had not brought any good news for him that day. Kunin mentioned the latest McCain-Obama polls, which were indicating a tight race. McCain has ardently supported Saakashvili ever since the two men met, in Washington, in the mid-nineties; he has visited Georgia several times.
“He told us if he gets elected he’ll make his first official visit to Georgia,” Saakashvili said. I suggested they might have to rename George W. Bush Street, the airport highway. Saakashvili laughed. “No, we’ll call Tskhinvali New McCain or something.”

Saakashvili’s enthusiasm, volubility, and charm have helped him to cultivate American politicians in a way that has not come naturally to former Soviet leaders. (Kunin, whose mother is Madeleine Kunin, a former governor of Vermont, told me, “Really, he’s just a typical Western politician.”) Vice-President-elect Biden has also been a supporter, and visited Georgia in August. In some ways, the force of Saakashvili’s personality has elevated his country’s status beyond what its size would usually merit. One Western diplomat formerly stationed in Tbilisi told me that, though he was wary of Saakashvili’s impetuousness, he understood his appeal. “Here’s a little beacon of light coming from the Caucasus, a leader on the Western path of democracy and market reform who speaks impeccable English,” he said. Georgia had come to represent a small spot of good news against the morass of Iraq and Afghanistan. The diplomat said, “We saw in him things we wanted to see.”

Positioned on the southern slope of the Caucasus Mountains, which cut across the neck of land between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea, Georgia lies along the ancient Silk Road, a route that has been partly retraced with oil pipelines. The country has long been a battleground for competing powers, and in the early nineteenth century it acceded to the Russian Empire, which it hoped would protect it against the Persians. But it stubbornly maintained its own identity, with its Georgian Orthodox Church and a language that is not Turkic or Slavic or Indo-European and is written with a distinctly cursive alphabet.
With the collapse of the Communist bloc, in 1991, Georgia regained its autonomy but was immediately mired in a civil war and two separatist wars—in Abkhazia, on the coast of the Black Sea, and in South Ossetia. In 1992, a triumvirate of militia commanders invited Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party and Foreign Minister under Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, to be their leader. The Georgian forces were defeated in Abkhazia, and a quarter million ethnic Georgians were pushed out. In South Ossetia, tens of thousands fled, and the enclave became a “frozen” conflict zone, with an unrecognized separatist government, policed by mistrustful Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian peacekeepers monitored by a half-dozen or so European military observers.

Shevardnadze was elected President in 1995, and brought stability, but by the time he won reëlection, in 2000, Georgia had sunk into an era of economic stagnation and endemic corruption. In winter, there was sometimes less than four hours of electricity a day in Tbilisi. Many government salaries were the equivalent of thirty-five dollars a month. Police would stop cars to demand, often apologetically, two-dollar bribes.

Parliamentary elections in November, 2003, were seen as a referendum on Shevardnadze’s rule; Georgians had become openly frustrated with the status quo. Independent exit polls showed the United National Movement, led by Saakashvili, then head of Tbilisi’s city council, in front, with twenty-six per cent of the vote; the government party second, with nineteen per cent; and the rest divided among smaller parties. Somehow, though, the official results gave Shevardnadze’s party a small plurality. Saakashvili and other opposition politicians led demonstrations in Tbilisi, a model of well-organized, tenacious but peaceful protest. (Ukraine’s Orange Revolution followed a year later.) At the climax of three weeks of protests, as
Shevardnadze refused to negotiate or call another election, Saakashvili and other protesters pushed through the doors of the parliament, disrupting a speech by Shevardnadze. Saakashvili, holding up a rose in one hand, cried, “Resign immediately!” Shevardnadze was hustled away by his bodyguards—he resigned the following day—and Saakashvili picked up his abandoned glass of tea and drank it. He was elected President in January, 2004, with ninety-six per cent of the vote.

Six months into his first term, Saakashvili told the Financial Times, “People compare my style with that of J.F.K., but in terms of substance, I feel much closer to Atatürk or Ben-Gurion or General de Gaulle—people who had to build nation states.”

Saakashvili was born in Tbilisi in 1967. His parents divorced before he was three, and he grew up as an only child among five adults—his mother, a university history lecturer; her parents; and her grandparents—in an apartment on a wide avenue in a new suburb of Tbilisi. When I visited his mother recently, we drank tea and ate raspberry cream cake in the same small sitting room where Saakashvili had grown up. She told me that as a boy he had “a lot of attention, and everyone somehow contributed to raising him.” They were a family of professionals, but they were not part of the Soviet élite. “I remember my grandfather had a special coupon from some institute he lectured in,” Saakashvili told me. “Once a year we could go and receive two Finnish sausages, five or six specialty sprats from Latvia, Finnish chocolate, and sometimes, if we were very lucky, a box of red caviar. It was a very humiliating experience. You had to stand in long lines in some basement of the Communist Party headquarters or whatever, and we were standing there together—these professors together with the drivers of heads of departments of
“I grew up with the idea, like all my generation, that the West was an absolute paradise and that we lived in an absolute hell. That was the identity of my generation.”

Saakashvili wanted to travel outside the Soviet Union. He was fascinated by Western politicians—“I loved Reagan and Thatcher”—and, after serving in the Soviet Army for two years, he began studying international law at the Institute of International Relations, in Kiev. He was there as the Soviet Union fell apart. After graduating, Saakashvili worked for a while as a human-rights officer for the Georgian government and married a Dutch lawyer, Sandra Roelofs, within three months of meeting her, at a summer course on human rights in Strasbourg. Saakashvili told me that Sandra had wanted to go to Somalia on a humanitarian mission: “I told her that Georgia was as bad as Somalia, except there is some hope.” Still, options for an ambitious young lawyer in Tbilisi during the early nineties were few, and in 1993 Saakashvili won a scholarship to Columbia Law School.

Sandra and Misha initially lived in Astoria, Queens, in a basement apartment whose landlord “always wanted to turn the lights out.” Sandra worked at Cheesy Pizza for four dollars an hour. But within a year or so both had found jobs at New York law firms, and they moved to the Upper West Side. “Perfect, almost posh,” Saakashvili said.

The following year, Saakashvili began working toward a Ph.D. in international law at George Washington University. As a dissertation topic, he chose *uti possedetis*, a principle in international law maintaining that newly autonomous states should have the same borders as they had before independence. The point of it, he said, in a clear reference to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was that “illegal acts cannot produce results.”
When he arrived in Washington as a student, he was dismayed to find Lafayette Square, opposite the White House, full of homeless people and rats, and the nearby streets in disrepair. “You get a sense what different governments are,” he recounted. “The road was really very bad, worse than roads in Shevardnadze’s time. But because local D.C. government was broke—even if it was leading to the White House, who cares? There he sits, the most powerful President in the world, but he cannot fix the road!” He went on, “They call it separation of powers. Some people would call it democracy. I would call it inefficient.”

Saakashvili never finished his doctorate. In 1995, Zurab Zhvania, one of the young reformers in Shevardnadze’s Citizens’ Union party, asked him to return to Georgia and get involved in judicial reform. His dissertation adviser, Thomas Buergenthal, a Holocaust survivor who is now a judge at the International Court of Justice, in The Hague, also encouraged him to return. Saakashvili recalls his saying, “Look, you don’t have to write this thesis. Change your country and call it ‘The Making of a New Country.’ It will be much more interesting.”

Saakashvili went back and entered parliament on the governing-party list. In 1999, he ran to represent Vake, a district of Tbilisi built in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, when Soviet architecture could still manage grand, high ceilings and parquet floors for the apparatchik class. “I was running against the very corrupt head of tax inspection,” he said. “We thought I would easily win because I am young, modern, et cetera, et cetera. But we did some polls and saw he was ahead by a very large margin. So that was the first real election campaign in Georgia. The first billboards, the first negative ads—the first real political ads on TV. It was really a classical Western political campaign,” he said. “And I won by fifty votes.”
In 2000, Shevardnadze made Saakashvili his Justice Minister. Soon after, he stormed into a cabinet meeting trailing a TV crew and brandishing photographs of new dachas owned by various ministers. This move—audacious, self-righteous, and media-savvy—became a template for his future. He resigned, after less than a year, formed his own political party, and soon afterward was elected head of Tbilisi’s city council.

As a young parliamentarian, Saakashvili made several trips to Washington with Zhvania, the man who had urged him to return to Georgia, and knocked on any door on Capitol Hill that might open. (Saakashvili grasped very early the importance of connections in Washington, and as President he has paid eight hundred thousand dollars to Orion Strategies, a two-man lobbying firm run by Randy Scheunemann, a close adviser to John McCain.) He recalled, “We would have a big map and tell them, ‘This is America. This is Russia. This is Georgia. This is the pipeline. This is why Georgia matters.’”

Saakashvili’s first months as President were heady. Most of the police force was fired and replaced, and crime went down. Tax rates were cut, but revenues increased. Civil-service jobs were eliminated, and ministers accused of corruption were arrested on national television. In Tbilisi, one common criticism of Saakashvili is that his impatience to get things done has subverted the institution-building that should be the bedrock of democratic reform. “I’ve seen him do things that are right out of Giuliani’s playbook, and I’ve seen him do things that are right out of Putin’s,” Lincoln Mitchell, a professor of international politics at Columbia who worked in Tbilisi for two years for the National Democratic Institute, an American nonprofit, told me. “It’s like he has a good angel and a bad angel on his shoulders, and the good angel is telling him to do the right thing and the bad angel is telling him just to do what he needs to do to get it done.”
By 2007, Georgia’s G.D.P. was growing by more than twelve per cent. There were freshly laid roads, renovated schools and hospitals, new housing developments, and elaborate public fountains (including one that spouts to the theme from “Mission Impossible”). Foreign direct investment was about $1.7 billion last year, and there have been hundreds of privatizations. A foreign businessman who has lived in Georgia for almost a decade described Saakashvili’s government as “libertarians,” and said, “Milton Friedman would have been proud.” He was skeptical about much of the apparent success, though. “Many of the privatizations have been untransparent, and those of the privatizations that have been transparent have met all kinds of obstacles,” he said. (For example, some public utilities were sold to foreign-registered companies with obscure ownership structures.)

One adviser described Saakashvili’s project as “two hundred Western kids trying to drag four and a half million Georgians into the twenty-first century.” Saakashvili made liberal use of European and American advisers like Kunin, received early financial backing from the U.S. State Department and, indirectly, from the Soros Foundation, and included in his government senior officials with foreign passports (his first Foreign Minister was the former French Ambassador to Georgia, his current Minister of Economics is Georgian-American, his Defense Minister, until last week, was Georgian-Israeli), all of which contributed to the Russian sense that Georgia was a Western—and for “Western” the Russian élite tends to read “American”—proxy.

Saakashvili’s ministers argue that their postmodern economic experiment was threatening to Moscow because it provided an example of what it was possible to achieve in the region
without Russian sponsorship. But the economic reforms failed to help many ordinary Georgians, and the euphoria that followed the Rose Revolution was dissipating.

Levan Ramishvili, who works for the Liberty Institute, a think tank in Tbilisi, noted that unemployment in Georgia was eighteen per cent, and even higher in Tbilisi. Many of the reforms in health and education were poorly implemented or had not been funded. “We spend one of the smallest amounts of G.D.P. per capita on education in all of the post-Soviet countries,” he said. Meanwhile, the defense budget had increased to a third of all government expenditure. “There’s always another crisis that diverts political attention and resources or economic means away.”

In Tbilisi, Saakashvili’s government was increasingly seen as high-handed, ignoring common concerns and the rule of law. On November 2, 2007, fifty thousand protesters took to the streets—crowds that rivalled those of the Rose Revolution. They included the economically disaffected, those who believed the government had become corrupt, and others who were outraged by the arrest of Saakashvili’s former Defense Minister on corruption charges; in the midst of the investigation, the former minister had gone on television to announce that he was forming an opposition party, and accused Saakashvili of ordering a political murder and of other crimes. (Saakashvili called those charges absurd, and the former minister, after a brief time in prison, retracted them.) A television channel, Imedi, owned by Badri Patarkatsishvili, a millionaire oligarch, covered the demonstrations live and urged the protesters on, broadcasting denunciations of Saakashvili’s regime. When Saakashvili sent police to remove about seventy protesters who were camping out on the steps of the parliament building, Imedi broadcast what amounted to an appeal for reinforcements. As hundreds of protesters gathered,
riot police cleared the streets with tear gas and rubber bullets. That night, the police stormed and wrecked Imedi’s studios, forcing journalists and studio guests to lie face down on the carpet, and shut the station down. Saakashvili imposed ten days of emergency rule and claimed the protests were part of a Russian-backed plot to bring down his government.

Sozar Subari, Georgia’s public defender—his job is to be a sort of civil-liberties ombudsman—told me that he had tried to intervene between demonstrators and police, only to be beaten himself: “My staff member said, ‘What are you doing? He is the public defender!’ and he also got one hit.” The laws that Saakashvili had passed included positive reforms, but in practice, Subari said, political pressure on the courts and on judges had increased. “In reality, the prosecutor just moves his eyebrow and the judge knows what to do,” he said. “The law has been adjusted for the comfort of the ruling party as if it were the reign of Louis XIV.” He outlined several cases of police violence, confiscated properties, and businessmen harassed by tax police. Four years into a five-year tenure, Subari, constitutionally, cannot be fired, but he told me (“And this is how it always works in Georgia”) that some months ago he got a call from an old university friend who insinuated that he should resign and take a job with an independent agency at a higher salary. “They could say I was resigning for health reasons,” he said.

Saakashvili’s American supporters tend to disregard questions about his democratic credentials. One Western diplomat told me that the measures against the demonstrators were not so different from those practiced in European capitals. But the numbers on the streets had shaken Saakashvili, and he resigned and called for early Presidential elections. Holding the election, he told me, was the riskiest thing he had ever done. “We were
living in a city that just hated us,” he said. In January, 2008, he was reëlected, with fifty-three per cent of the vote, but he lost in large parts of Tbilisi.

One night this fall, I had dinner on the terrace of the Hotel Kopala with a member of parliament. He told me that before the Rose Revolution he couldn’t have afforded to eat at a restaurant as nice as this; in terms of economic development, he appreciated what Saakashvili had achieved. But he spent most of the meal criticizing Saakashvili’s arrogance, imperviousness to advice, and recklessness. He told me that a few weeks after the Rose Revolution he and a friend had bumped into Saakashvili, and the friend said, “You understand now you’ll be President of this damned country. And you’ll destroy us, because you are crazy!” Saakashvili laughed and said, “But I can always invent something”—he snapped his fingers—“and get out of a mess.”

Saakashvili campaigned for President both times on a platform that promised greater economic growth but also made it clear that the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would be a priority of his Presidency. Georgians generally view Abkhazia and South Ossetia as an integral part of their homeland—the regions have long been ethnically mixed—and their return as a pressing patriotic issue.

Saakashvili did manage to regain control of Adjara, an autonomous region on the Black Sea along the Turkish border, in the spring of 2004. Adjara had been ruled since Georgian independence as a personal fiefdom of Aslan Abashidze, a former minor functionary. He decreed that all the houses in the capital, Batumi, should be painted white; tried to inveigle his way into a connection with Washington by offering Hillary Clinton’s brothers an exclusive deal on hazelnuts; and pocketed revenue from the port and border trade. Abashidze was
unpopular, but he was supported by Moscow. Saakashvili encouraged protests and imposed sanctions, hoping for a sequel to the Rose Revolution. As Abashidze was seeking asylum in Russia, Saakashvili went on television to proclaim, “Aslan has fled. Adjara is free!” Soon after this intoxicating success, he began to devote serious attention to the problem of South Ossetia.

In August, 2004, Saakashvili sent Georgian police into South Ossetia to shut down the market in smuggled cigarettes and gasoline that was flourishing on the border there. This move led to clashes between Georgian peacekeepers and South Ossetian militia. The Americans were alarmed. One Western diplomat told me, “They were stumbling into this mess, and I think there was plenty of fault on both sides.” He said that he told Saakashvili to stop the fighting. “He got furious. He said, ‘Damn it, we cannot afford to be in this situation,’ ” and he conceded.

Saakashvili told me that, back then, he had still hoped that he could persuade the South Ossetian leadership that a democratic, economically resurgent Georgia would be a better partner than Russia. “I thought we needed patience,” he said. The problem, according to Oksana Antonenko, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, in London, was that Saakashvili fundamentally underestimated the depth of feeling and hostility on the Ossetian side. “When he realized that he was not going to prevail by sheer charisma and vision for integrating with the West, he started to operate more and more in a pattern where he just didn’t want to deal with those people who didn’t like him—with the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians—and he created a kind of semblance and image, a Potemkin village of a peace process.”
He also may have misjudged Russia’s commitment to maintaining its hegemony in the region. “It’s impossible to imagine a weak Russia in the Caucasus,” Sergey Markedonov, of the Institute for Political and Military Analysis, in Moscow, said. “It’s our tradition. It’s not European, I understand, but it’s really, really impossible to ignore it.”

Saakashvili, meanwhile, strengthened his military ties to the West. He sent two thousand troops to Iraq (they formed the third-largest contingent there, after the American and the British, before being called home in the wake of the August war) and lobbied, with the Bush Administration’s support, to be admitted to NATO. Three former Soviet Republics—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—have become NATO members, and even the remote possibility that Georgia might join them has infuriated the Russian government. Masha Lipman told me that in Moscow NATO expansion felt like “an encroaching force advancing closer and closer to what Russia regarded as its legitimate sphere of influence.”

In 2006, Georgia arrested four Russian officers on charges of espionage; Russia expelled several thousand Georgian nationals living in Russia, embargoed Georgian exports, and cut air and postal links. A few weeks later, Saakashvili organized elections in South Ossetia’s Georgian villages; Dmitri Sanakoev, a former South Ossetian prime minister and militia leader, became head of a new administration, to compete with the region’s Russian-backed government. Sanakoev, with money from Tbilisi, built houses, clinics, and sports facilities, but many Ossetians saw him as a traitor and a puppet. Russia increased the amount it paid in pensions to South Ossetians and the number of Russian passports it handed out. There was often gunfire around Ossetian and Georgian checkpoints, and, this July, Sanakoev narrowly escaped an assassination attempt.
The sequence of events that followed is much in dispute. The skirmishes between Ossetian militia and Georgian police in early August appeared at first to be just another flareup. Then, according to the Georgians, the attacks on their positions intensified, and gunshots came close to some Georgian villages; attempts to engage the Ossetians in negotiations failed. “The Russians clearly just refused to talk to us, and the separatists refused to back off, which was very unusual,” Saakashvili said. He concluded that this was “preplanned” to provoke Georgian action. (The Russians say that it was the Georgians who didn’t want to talk.) Temuri Yakobashvili, the Georgian Minister for Reintegration, watched these events with unease and some confusion. On the afternoon of August 7th, he drove to Tskhinvali for the second time in a week. He found the streets almost deserted. “You know, it was weird,” he told me. “In Tskhinvali, we discovered a completely empty city. You just had a bad feeling—there were no people on the streets, no cars on the streets. The city was sort of pregnant for war.”

Yakobashvili told me that he met with General Marat Kulakhmetov, commander of the Russian peacekeeping force, who told him that the Ossetians were not under Russian control and suggested that a unilateral Georgian ceasefire might calm things down. At seven o’clock, Saakashvili announced the ceasefire on television, and offered an amnesty to Ossetian fighters and broad autonomy for the region. But, according to the Georgians, there was continued mortar fire from South Ossetian positions. (According to the Times, European military observers reported no sign of shelling in the area until the Georgian artillery began firing.)

Later that evening, Yakobashvili said, Saakashvili received a call that seemed to confirm reports of Russian units moving south through the Roki Tunnel, the only road between Russia and South Ossetia. He described Saakashvili putting down the
receiver: “He got pale. I asked him what had happened, and he said, ‘They’re moving.’” Saakashvili asked Yakobashvili, “What do you think? Are we becoming Israel?” (Russian authorities say traffic through the tunnel that night was either an ordinary troop rotation or supplies for their peacekeepers.) Saakashvili told me that he had tried to call Western allies, but Bush was already in Beijing, along with Putin, for the opening ceremony of the Olympics. At 11:30 P.M., on Saakashvili’s order, Georgian artillery opened fire on Tskhinvali. Rockets hit civilian housing blocks, South Ossetian government buildings, and the Russian peacekeeping barracks.

In the next four days, Russian aircraft decimated Georgian battalions; Russian tank columns blocked the main national highway, surrounded the port of Poti and Georgian military bases, and roamed the roads of western Georgia. The Russians presented themselves as the defenders of the Ossetians, but much of the world saw the conflict in terms of the Cold War paradigm of a Russian military threat. T-shirts appeared in Tbilisi with “Stop Russia!” printed on the front and “Prague 1968” on the back.

It is unclear what Saakashvili thought or hoped he could achieve by escalating the conflict so dramatically. The immediate effect was to turn the fight with the South Ossetians into all-out war and to pull in the Russians. On August 11th, Saakashvili ordered that there be no further resistance. Sarkozy intervened to broker a ceasefire, a six-point plan that required all parties to withdraw to prewar positions—although Russian and Ossetian forces still occupy parts of the enclave that had been under Georgian administration, as well as Abkhazia’s Kodori Gorge. (The Russians say that they are there at the invitation of the Ossetians and the Abkhaz.) More than four hundred Georgians were killed, more than half of them civilians, along with more than a hundred and fifty
Ossetians and, according to Russian military sources, sixty-four Russian soldiers. Two hundred thousand people were displaced; months later, twenty thousand Georgians remain unable to return to their villages in South Ossetia.

Privately, every Western diplomat I spoke with said that the Georgian attack on Tskhinvali was a mistake. They blamed Saakashvili’s hubris and questioned the broader policy of provoking Russia. In some ways, he was lucky. The Russian reaction—which Saakashvili insisted to me was “not a reaction but an action”—had the effect of uniting the Americans and the Europeans in condemnation. The long-term consequences of the debacle remain unclear. “I think everyone lost,” Richard Holbrooke told me. “It’s a Georgian loss because their economy has been heavily damaged and foreign direct investment has dried up, and now this credit crunch is going to have an adverse affect. I don’t think Misha’s position has been strengthened politically. Russia lost because it was their real objective to topple Saakashvili, and they found that they had alienated the West. And it revealed Russia as being very dangerous to their neighbors. And the U.S. and NATO lost because there was nothing we could do for a small democratic country we were supporters of.”

In September, Saakashvili came to New York for the annual opening session of the United Nations. He was eager to shore up American support—a billion dollars’ worth of direct aid had already been announced. I met Daniel Kunin at Rockefeller Center, where he was waiting for Saakashvili to arrive for an interview with NBC’s Brian Williams. Kunin was happy. Transparency International had just released its new “corruption perceptions index,” and Georgia’s rating had improved from No. 79 to No. 67 in the world, well above Russia, which was No. 147. “It’s a gift. I just added it into the speech,” Kunin said.
That afternoon, Saakashvili addressed the General Assembly. He did not mention Russia by name, calling it “our neighbor,” but he decried the threat to territorial integrity and called for an international investigation into the causes of the war. He professed his commitment to democratic values and promised a redoubled reform effort, a “Second Rose Revolution.” After the speech, he went outside to greet a crowd of Georgian protesters holding up “Stop Russia!” placards and chanting “Misha! Misha! Misha!” Then he went back in to attend a reception hosted by President Bush.

After about half an hour, Saakashvili emerged from the reception and stopped at the bottom of an escalator to talk to a Central Asian president. The man shook his hand and left, but Saakashvili lingered. Just then, President Bush came out, accompanied by the American Ambassador to the U.N., Zalmay Khalilzad. Saakashvili approached and, in one fluid motion, put his arm around Bush’s shoulder, shook his hand, and warmly greeted Khalilzad. The three of them rode up the escalator, chatting like old friends, until Bush and Khalilzad stepped toward a bank of elevators and disappeared.

Waiting for his car by the side entrance, Saakashvili was ebullient. He flipped through a copy of *Newsweek* with his picture in it and showed off his new watch: “Kenneth Cole. I got it in Miami.” (Saakashvili has a penchant for watches; he buys several a year and tends to give them away when he gets bored with them.) He said that he didn’t want to stay for the dinner after Bush’s reception. “First, they don’t feed you well at this thing,” he said, “and then they sit you next to Mugabe.”

In New York, Saakashvili kept his Secret Service detail busy. When he first came to the city as President, the Secret Service referred to him as “the Energizer Bunny.” Saakashvili walks fast: heading to a meeting with *Time* editors one afternoon, he left a trail of staff members along Sixth Avenue. “Is this is a
Presidential race?” his protocol chief asked, panting. He eats fast: two-handed, reaching for a second helping even as he is chewing the first. He talks fast, and in New York he talked to everyone from McCain and Palin to Henry Kissinger, George Soros, Ban Ki-moon, and Richard Gere. (The only person he missed was Barack Obama.) He gave interviews to NBC, CNN, the BBC, PBS, and Fox News. By the end of the week, he was joking that the only channels he had not appeared on were the Food Network and Animal Planet.

The morning before his speech at the U.N., Saakashvili spent an hour chatting with Bill Clinton. “It’s amazing! I am not American—and that they would perceive me as one of them and that it’s interesting to know my opinion,” he said. “No European would gossip with me this way.”

In the evenings, he went out until two or three in the morning. He likes parties: one night, he and his bodyguards crammed into a corridor at the Chelsea Hotel; another night, he went to watch the first McCain-Obama debate at a book party in the West Village. He visited an architectural exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art to scout out ideas. Saakashvili seemed to want to stay in New York, even after most of his delegation had returned to Tbilisi. Protocol officials scrambled to rearrange flights as he postponed his departure again and again. I asked him how things were at home. “As well as can be expected,” he said.

Saakashvili enjoyed a postwar bounce in his approval rating at home, but there have been signs of discontent. Nino Burjanadze, who had been one of the leaders of the Rose Revolution but split from Saakashvili’s party just before the May elections, announced that she had forty-three questions for Saakashvili about the events of the summer, and called for an official inquiry. (When I asked Saakashvili about Burjanadze, he said, “Nobody likes her.”) One of his closest
ministers told me he would support a referendum on early elections, a constitutional mechanism that might allow for Saakashvili’s resignation if popular opinion turned against the government. (His current term lasts until January, 2013; constitutionally, he cannot run again.) The minister seemed torn about his and his colleagues’ responsibility for the summer defeat. “People will judge,” he said. “People will judge depending on how we proceed with the economic recovery and how we handle the political discussion about the war.”

One evening after his return from New York, Saakashvili and I sat by the Black Sea, at a government dacha in Adjara. Two days earlier, Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, had met with the Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, in St. Petersburg, and discussed a new Baltic pipeline to carry gas to Germany and Western Europe. In the same press conference, Merkel had said discouraging things about Georgia’s prospects for NATO membership. I asked Saakashvili if he had been upset.

“I think it wasn’t nice,” he replied. “She tried to balance, but it’s not the right time to balance.” He talked about the pressure Russia was putting on Ukraine. He said that he had spoken to Victor Yushchenko, Ukraine’s President, the night before, and that Yushchenko had been “very emotional.” He mentioned, again, the arrogance of Putin.

Saakashvili didn’t think, really, that he had been the loser of that summer’s war. “If we thought winning was taking over Tskhinvali—well, it didn’t mean much for me anyway. To get another hundred Georgian towns to administer?” He dismissed the loss of the territory that had fallen under separatist control: “So what? These are two districts of Georgia. It’s not a setback.
We are in a fight, and this is the position of fighting.” The larger point was “to get rid of Russian influence,” he said. “And the Russians overreacted.”

He went on, “If anyone had any illusions that we could get rid of two centuries of Russian influence in one week, that would have been a big mistake, but we are on the way. This is the beginning of the end for them in this region.” He added, “But I would like to be successful myself, not one generation from now.”

During the American Presidential campaign, Saakashvili was always careful, when asked about his friendship with John McCain, to emphasize his bipartisan support in America and his relationship with Joe Biden. When I spoke to him after the election, he drew parallels between himself and Obama: they had both spent their first nights at Columbia sleeping on the street, having been locked out; and they had both felt the weight of popular expectations as young Presidents. “O.K., I led a revolution for five million people in Georgia, he leads a revolution for six billion. But I know, when everyone loves you, everyone wants to see in you something they want to see for themselves.” Still, he worried about “this new trend emerging —telling Obama, warning him and the new people that will be coming into the White House, that Georgia and Ukraine are like this poisonous stock that you should drop, abandon.”

He said that he had talked to Obama a few days before, and that although they hadn’t gone into specifics, he found him well informed and broadly supportive. But, he acknowledged, an Administration preoccupied with the economic crisis might not consider Georgia a priority. “To give up Georgia is easy, because Georgia doesn’t have a big lobby in America or some vested interests. It’s all about how idealistic America can be.”
Earlier, he had told me, “With Americans, you can be yourself, and they accept you. I’ve never heard from Americans that I’m hotheaded, bossy. From Europe, I’ve heard a lot of this. Because, for them, in some cases, in Europe spontaneity looks like a dangerous thing.”
Marching Through Georgia. In Honor of Maj. Gen.Â To reckon with the host, While we were marching through Georgia. [Chorus].

[Verse 5]. So we made a thoroughfare for Freedom and her train, Sixty miles in latitude three hundred to the main; Treason fled before us, for resistance was in vain, While we were marching through Georgia. [Chorus].

Recommended Citation. Work, Henry Clay, “Marching Through Georgia” (1865). - Historic Sheet Music Collection.898. Identifiersm_marchingthroughgeorgia. Marching Through Georgia chords Henry Clay Work. G C G Bring the good ol' Bugle boys, we'll sing another song. A7 D7 Sing it with a spirit that will start the world along. G C G C G Sing it like we used to sing it fifty thousand strong, D G while we were marching through Georgia. C G Hurrah! Hurrah!