

When History Begins – Russia, Ukraine & the US

Contrary to what hypocritical U.S. rulers and their loyal mass media suggest, two propositions can both be — and indeed are — true:

1. that Russia has grossly, brutally, and criminally mishandled the situation it has faced with respect to Ukraine, and
2. that the U.S. government since the late 1990s has been *entirely responsible* for imposing that situation on Russia.

If you want the fine details, you can do no better than to watch my Libertarian Institute colleague Scott Horton's excellent cataloging of the irresponsible misdeeds of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joseph Biden in this recent lecture. If, after absorbing this shocking record of indisputable facts, you are seething at what the U.S. government has done to squander a historic chance for good relations with Russia, you will be fully justified — and then some. (See also this 2015 lecture by John Mearsheimer, the respected "realist" foreign policy analyst at the University of Chicago.)

To appreciate what bipartisan U.S. foreign policy has wrought, think about 1989 when the undreamt-of virtually bloodless dismantling of the Soviet empire began. At that point humanity was on the verge of a new chapter in which the world's largest nuclear superpowers would no longer confront each other, holding all everyone hostage. Think about that, and then learn how the U.S. government blew it deliberately, despite all the warnings that the consequences would be dire.

How so? By kicking the Russian people in the teeth repeatedly in all kinds of ways when they were reeling from seven decades of communism. If the U.S. government's intent had been to destroy the chance for this historic turn, it couldn't have done a better job.

Americans have a funny way of thinking that history began the day of the latest crisis. The politicians and media feed this bad habit. So if Russia invades Ukraine, the only explanation is that he's power-mad, if not just plain mad. The idea that the U.S. might have set the stage isn't allowed to be entertained. With social-media magnates sucking up to the power elite, this is serious stuff.

Do Americans want to know why Russia went to war? They might not like to hear that "their" government must shoulder a good deal of blame, but it's undeniable that since World War II the power that occupies Middle North America has had its heavy hand in virtually every part of the world. The rules of international law that all nations are supposed to observe simply don't apply to the United States. Just look at the invasions and regime changes that have gone on since 2001, not to mention back to the early 1950s. That's

what it means to be the exceptional nation. The rules apply to everyone except America's rulers. (See Robert Wright's "In Defense of Whataboutism.")

This history forms the larger context in which the unconscionable Russian war on Ukraine — with all the terror it's inflicting on innocents — is taking place. It is unseemly for an American president to piously admonish the Russian government about its breaches of national sovereignty in light of the shameful U.S. record.

Since the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, U.S. presidents have taken a series of actions that seemed designed to make the Russians distrust the West in the new era. This is not hindsight. As noted, many respected establishment foreign-policy figures warned against such measures.

The measures included the bombing of Russia's ally Serbia in the late 1990s; the repeated expansion of NATO, the postwar alliance founded to counter the Soviet Union, to include former Soviet allies and republics; the public talk of including the former Soviet republics Ukraine and Georgia in the Western alliance; the trashing of long-standing anti-nuclear-weapons treaties with Russia; the placing of defensive missile launchers (which could be converted to offensive launchers) in Poland and Romania; the attempts to sabotage the Russia-to-Germany Nord Stream 2 natural-gas pipeline deal; instigating the 2014 regime change in Ukraine (following earlier regime-changes operations in Ukraine and Georgia); the arming of Ukraine since 2017; the conducting of NATO war exercises, with U.S. personnel, near the Russian border; the years-long evidence-free effort to persuade Americans that Russia manipulated the 2016 presidential election to elect Donald Trump; and much, much, *much* more. Trump — recall his goading of NATO members into spending more on their militaries — was among the offenders: his anti-Russia moves, including NATO expansion like all of his 21st-century predecessors, would fill a list as long as Wilt Chamberlain's arm. If he was a Russian puppet, as the Democrats, intelligence apparatus, and mainstream media want us to believe, then the Russians have a great deal to learn about puppeteering.

Take one of the biggest spurs to war: the eastward expansion of NATO, which the U.S. government and Western Europe promised would not happen after Germany was reunited while the Soviet Union was heading toward termination. It happened anyway, but not because Russia had behaved badly toward the West. It hadn't. In fact, after 9/11 Russian ruler Vladimir Putin was the first to call Bush II to offer his support. Later Putin even suggested that Russia be invited to join NATO, something President George H. W. Bush had once mentioned. One wonders why NATO was even necessary with the Soviet Union gone, but if Russia could join — really, what was the point?

The expansion of NATO by 1,200 miles toward Russia demonstrates how myopic American rulers can be. American critics repeatedly pointed out that no president would not have

tolerated Russia's inviting Mexico and Canada into its now-defunct Warsaw Pact. Yet NATO now includes the Baltic states — those former Soviet republics on the Russian border, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia — and Eastern European states that were once in the Warsaw Pact.

Indeed, we already know how the U.S. government reacts when its security concerns are flouted. In 1962 President John F. Kennedy was ready to launch a nuclear war against the Soviet Union when it placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. For days the world sat on the edge of its seat wondering if the end was near. (I remember it!) Finally, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev withdrew the missiles, but only when Kennedy *secretly* agreed to remove American nuclear-tipped missiles from Turkey.

Later American presidents forgot about that crisis. Clinton added Warsaw Pact states late in his second term. Then it was Bush II's turn. At its April 2008 Bucharest summit, NATO declared that it “welcomes Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.” This was a fateful move. As noted, pillars of the foreign policy establishment from George Kennan to Paul Nitze to Robert McNamara had already forcefully spoken out against the first rounds of NATO expansion, which included the Baltic states. No less a figure than William Burns, Bush II's ambassador to Russia and now Biden's CIA chief, said in 2008,

Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin's sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.

Putin responded to the summit declaration, saying he deemed it a “direct threat” to Russia. A few months later, the emboldened president of Georgia, on Russia's southern border, attacked EU-authorized Russian peacekeepers in the Republic of South Ossetia, which had earlier broken away from Georgia. Russia responded by invading and occupying Georgia. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili thought — no doubt lead on by the U.S. government — that the West would back him up, but it did not. Washington, London, Paris, and the rest of NATO were not willing to go to risk a nuclear war with Russia over South Ossetia. (Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky seems to be imitating Shaakashvili.)

This is all too similar to what's going on today, but with something more. After talking about bringing Ukraine into NATO, the U.S. and EU in February 2014 instigated a coup in Kyiv, in which opponents of the government, including neo-Nazis, drove a *democratically elected* and Russia-friendly president, Viktor Yanukovich, from office. A leaked recording of a phone call between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland (now a Biden

official) and U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt revealed that the coup and the new leadership of the country were orchestrated by the U.S. State Department. This followed billions of dollars in U.S. aid to “pro-democracy,” that is, anti-Yanukovich, organizations.

Yanukovich had been willing to deal with the European Union, but when he balked at the terms of the proposed loan, Russia offered Ukraine \$15 billion under more favorable terms. This the EU and U.S. government could not tolerate. Yanukovich had to go.

Keep in mind that eastern Ukraine and Crimea, which is filled with Russian-speaking people, had voted heavily for Yanukovich, with the western part going for his opponent. So driving out the elected president was a direct slap at the ethnic Russians. When the new government came to power, it downgraded Russians from official-language status and tried to cut back on the autonomy of the far-eastern provinces, the Donbas region, which borders Russia. Violence erupted and has continued. Meanwhile, Russia annexed Crimea, which has been a Russian security concern and the home of its only year-round warm-water naval base since the 18th century. Russia could not take the risk that Crimea would become a base for NATO forces. The predominantly ethnic Russians in Crimea approved of the annexation. But one thing Russia refused to do was to accept an annexation invitation from the people in the Donbas.

As a result, the U.S. government sent large amounts of aid to Ukraine, but Obama refused to send weapons because he did not want to escalate the conflict or risk direct war with Russia. He noted, properly, that Ukraine was a core security interest of Russia but not of the United States and that in a conflict over nearby Ukraine, Russia would have a large advantage over the United States, despite America’s much larger military. Trump, however, reversed Obama’s policy and sent massive arms shipments to Ukraine, including anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons.

As Russia increased pressure on Ukraine over the last year, with a buildup of troops near the border, it made clear its demands: no NATO membership for Ukraine and no missile launchers in Eastern Europe. Since taking office, Biden has talked tough, proclaiming that the United States would support Ukrainian sovereignty, while also saying, first, that U.S. troops would not be committed, second, that Ukraine would not be joining NATO anytime soon, and third, that offensive nuclear missiles would not be placed in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, he scoffed at Russia’s demands, insisting that no one but NATO would decide who became a member. This sounded like schoolyard pettiness, with Biden refusing to formalize for Russia his disavowal of things that Biden had already said he would not do.

Would Russia have shelved plans for the invasion had Biden not been so wrongheaded? Who can say? But what was there to lose?

So here we are. The situation is dangerous in a global sense because, in the fog of war, shit

happens. (Sorry.) It doesn't help that some prominent Americans, still in the minority, want the U.S. government to do more than impose sanctions, send even more troops to neighboring NATO countries, and further arm Ukraine, all of which Biden is doing — some, like President Zelensky, are calling for a U.S.-enforced no-fly zone over Ukraine, which would bring America into direct military conflict with Russia. Some are even calling for regime change in Russia. Need we be reminded that, like the U.S. government, Russia has thousands of hydrogen bombs ready to launch. Are these people nuts?

No, history did not begin on February 24, 2022, or even March 18, 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea.

What now? It's ridiculous to think that Russia — given its \$1.5 trillion GDP (smaller than Italy's and Texas's) and \$60 billion military budget (6 percent of the total U.S. military budget) — is out to re-establish the Russian empire of old or the Soviet Union. To put things in perspective, the U.S. government has had recent annual *increases* in military spending that exceeded Russia's entire military budget.

The goal must be a ceasefire. Biden can facilitate that by doing what he should have done long ago: put in writing that Ukraine and Georgia will not join NATO, that the missile launchers will be removed from Eastern Europe, and that the war exercises on Russia's border will end. Ukraine could help by accepting the status of neutrality with Finland-like assurances that it will not let its territory be used offensively against Russia. Biden should also propose that the arms-control treaties trashed by Bush II and Trump will be reinstated in talks with Russia.

Russia, of course, should pledge to leave Ukraine and offer compensation, while the heavily ethnic Russian areas in the east are given the freedom to join Russia.

We need not be at war — even if it's a new cold war — with Russia.