

# The American Conservative

## Our Dangerous Donbas Dalliance

*The diplomacy class has entirely forgotten George Washington's warnings about special relationships with foreign nations.*

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The Biden administration is going all in for Ukraine. Officials are increasingly abandoning caution about making America a co-belligerent against Russia. They are expanding weapons shipments to Kiev and making deliveries openly. Importantly, the administration has shifted its objectives from aiding Ukraine to weakening Russia.

Both President George Washington and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams warned Americans about this phenomenon. Yet the Russo-Ukraine war isn't the first time in recent years U.S. officials forgot which country they were supposed to represent.

In August 2008 the U.S. approached the brink with Russia over the republic of Georgia. After taking advantage of Moscow's post-Cold War weakness by pushing NATO ever eastward and dismantling Yugoslavia in the conflict over Kosovo, the George W. Bush administration promised to add Ukraine and Georgia to the "transatlantic" alliance. Moscow responded by backing separatists in Georgia, who had long resisted Tbilisi's rule. That nation's ever-reckless president, Mikheil Saakashvili, was convinced of U.S. support and bombarded Russian troops protecting the statelet of South Ossetia. Moscow retaliated.

Always preening for the cameras, presidential candidate John McCain, an early advocate of endless wars, insisted that "Today we are all Georgians." Worse, Bush administration officials, demonstrating hubris tinged with insanity, debated attacking Russian forces. Having already launched a forever conflict in Afghanistan and triggered ruinous sectarian strife in Iraq, they considered creating a nuclear standoff comparable to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Over what? Not American independence, liberty, or security. Rather, over the latest iteration of a tragic but irrelevant geopolitical struggle, ongoing for centuries and like so many others dotting the globe. While it was easy to sympathize with Georgia's plight, there was nothing in the Caucasus that warranted going to war, especially with a nuclear-armed power. Worse, Saakashvili sought to manipulate America into a potentially major conflict to regain territory that long resisted his nation's control.

More than two centuries ago America's first president, George Washington, foresaw this sort of obsequious subservience to other nations. Perhaps such a tendency was not surprising then. The colonies won their independence with support from France and Spain. The United States of America were barely united. The new nation was a makeweight in international affairs. Charting an independent course was not easy.

However, even after the U.S. became a superpower and the world's most powerful state, it still ended up in thrall of other nations and bondage to other governments. Countries as varied as Britain, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Taiwan, United Arab Emirates, Georgia, and several in Eastern Europe influenced critical U.S. policies to their advantage. Typically, they won special favors as "allies," caused America to treat their adversaries as its enemies, or both. Today, a similar phenomenon is occurring with Ukraine.

In his famous "Farewell Address," Washington wrote at a time when France was seeking the new nation's support against Great Britain. He warned his countrymen that "nothing is more essential than that permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded; and that, in place of them, just and amicable feelings towards all should be cultivated. The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred or a habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest."

Both emotions had negative impacts. For instance, "a passionate attachment of one nation for another produces a variety of evils. Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification."

The other side of the coin also was dangerous. Said Washington, "Antipathy in one nation against another disposes each more readily to offer insult and injury, to lay hold of slight causes of umbrage, and to be haughty and intractable, when accidental or trifling occasions of dispute occur. Hence, frequent collisions, obstinate, envenomed, and bloody contests. The nation, prompted by ill-will and resentment, sometimes impels to war the government, contrary to the best calculations of policy."

The Ukraine-Russia war increasingly fits Washington's analysis. Kiev deserves America's sympathy and support. Although allied intransigence helped lead to conflict, the invasion was unjustified, and Moscow bears full responsibility for its decision to attack its neighbor. However, U.S. support must be tempered by recognition that Ukraine is not important to, let alone vital for, American security. Therefore, any assistance should be tailored to avoid conflict with Russia. A conventional war with that country would be bad; a nuclear exchange would be catastrophic.

Yet U.S. officials are increasing their support for Ukraine, seemingly heedless of the risks. Antony Blinken and Lloyd Austin, secretaries of State and Defense respectively, visited Kiev in an ostentatious show of support. The administration recently approved another round of weapons shipments, tailored to fighting in the east.

Moreover, Biden officials have sharpened their focus on Russia. Before Moscow's invasion, the administration refused to treat seriously security concerns which Russian President Vladimir Putin had articulated for more than a decade. Yet the U.S. would never have tolerated another great power, whether Russia, China, or another, doing in the Western Hemisphere what the U.S. did in Europe.

Nevertheless, two weeks into the conflict President Joe Biden insisted that "Direct confrontation between NATO and Russia is World War III, something we must strive to prevent." However, that appears to be changing. For instance, the president declared for regime change,

unpersuasively trying to walk his statement back as a personal opinion. Now Austin says the administration's objective—with no attempt to camouflage his position as an emotional outburst—is a “weakened” Russia. That comes very close to declaring Moscow to be an enemy.

Overall, Biden's objectives increasingly look as much anti-Moscow as pro-Kiev. Noted David E. Sanger of the *New York Times*, “Austin and others in the Biden administration are becoming more explicit about the future they see: years of continuous contest for power and influence with Moscow that in some ways resembles what President John F. Kennedy termed the ‘long twilight struggle’ of the Cold War.”

Much worse is the possibility of a hot war. No doubt, the president is sincere in his desire to avoid nuclear conflict with Russia. However, many wars begin inadvertently and carelessly. The more openly and extensively the U.S. intervenes, the greater the likelihood that Moscow will retaliate, with escalation possible by both sides.

Russia already has raised the rhetorical temperature, warning “the United States and its allies to stop the irresponsible militarization of Ukraine, which implies unpredictable consequences for regional and international security.” More ominously, on Monday Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated: “NATO, in essence, is engaged in a war with Russia through a proxy and is arming that proxy. War means war.” He reiterated the threat, emphasizing that “I would not want to elevate those risks artificially. Many would like that. The danger is serious, real. And we must not underestimate it.”

Those inclined to dismiss the danger should remember that virtually no one imagined Putin would order a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The conflict matters far more to Russia than the U.S.; the former will spend and risk far more than America to succeed. Moreover, if Moscow's eastern offensive stalls, the regime is likely to contemplate fully using its greater firepower, potentially including tactical nuclear weapons. To the extent that Putin believes U.S. and allied military assistance is to blame for Russia's losses, he will be more inclined to strike such shipments, a legitimate military target, even if doing so might trigger escalation.

George Washington foresaw another consequence of an “all in” philosophy toward foreign governments. “How many opportunities do [foreign attachments] afford to tamper with domestic factions, to practice the arts of seduction, to mislead public opinion, to influence or awe the public council.” Journalists and think tanks have turned into PR operations on behalf of Kyiv. Worse, the campaign of journalistic and social media giants against “fake news” has become a ban on opposing views. Although Ukraine has better arguments than Russia, that is no reason to prevent critics from making Moscow's case.

A couple decades after Washington's talk John Quincy Adams, then secretary of state and later president, added his warning:

Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will commend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of

individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom.

Although the U.S. still claims to be the “land of the free,” it long ago shifted from being a republican to an imperial power. The resulting costs over the last two decades have been high. Needlessly sliding into war with Russia would be far worse.

In aiding Ukraine, American officials should remember that their responsibility is to the U.S. first. Indeed, they should reread Washington’s Farewell Address. Yes to helping friendly states under attack. No to becoming a slave to foreign interests. Unfortunately, U.S. policymakers increasingly fail to distinguish between the two.

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