



Pushing Nuclear War: Mitt Romney Reminds Americans That He Was Unfit To Be President

Doug Bandow

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Mitt Romney narrowly missed being elected president in 2012. So sure was he of victory that he reportedly spent a million dollars on fireworks to celebrate. Oops.

Americans were lucky. A majority were prescient in rejecting his candidacy, just as they did Sen. John McCain's bid four years before. McCain was dangerously unbalanced, ready to start multiple wars around the globe. He oft joined his equally irresponsible colleagues Lindsey Graham and Joe Lieberman in militaristic cheerleading, unconcerned about the consequences that might follow.

Perhaps McCain's most dangerous moment came in 2008 after Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili triggered a brief war with Moscow by firing on Russian forces, while apparently expecting Washington to back him. That was a step too far even for the Bush administration after it had wrecked Iraq. However, McCain flew to Tbilisi to preen before the cameras and promote his presidential campaign, declaring that "We are all Georgians."

McCain was but the most prominent of a gaggle of irresponsible GOP war hawks, most of whom got no closer to the military than arranging a photo op with someone in uniform. The 2016 Republican presidential race featured several poseurs acting as if they were George Patton reincarnated preparing to face down the Soviet menace.

New Jersey Chris Christie was the worst, fantasizing a conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin and threatening to shoot down Russian aircraft. He never considered that Moscow might shoot back. More recent and even more crazed were the thoughts, if they deserve to be called that, of Sen. Roger Wicker, who before Moscow's invasion of Ukraine urged the Biden administration to initiate nuclear war against Russia. Cities across America likely would be radioactive ruins today if he was sitting in the Oval Office.

The 2012 GOP presidential nominee, Mitt Romney, fit well within the Republican chickenhawk tradition. He proudly blustered about foreign policy even though neither he nor any of his five sons served in the military; when questioned about his lack of personal connection to the wars he might start, he cheerily explained that his kids were serving the nation by "helping me get elected." Ah, the incredible sacrifice. I certainly would have preferred serving in Fallujah or Helmand than in his campaign!

Romney of course played the international tough guy. His beta noire also was Moscow, which he famously declared to be "without question our number one geopolitical foe." It was an ostentatiously silly statement then. Vladimir Putin was a bad guy but had turned against the US only after it had ignored security commitments made to Moscow and adopted a politically and militarily aggressive policy in Europe. Had Washington taken Putin's security complaints seriously and sought a diplomatic modus vivendi as late as February, the current war might have been avoided. Unfortunately, we will never know because of obdurate faux warriors like Romney.

Ironically, given his fearmongering, the course of the Russo-Ukraine war demonstrates that Moscow poses little threat to America. Despite suffering significant casualties Russia might still win – it has mass and firepower on its side while Kyiv also has lost heavily. However, Moscow could not conquer Europe, let alone take on the US. For years Washington has been taxing the American people to provide defense welfare to European states which could have created a potent territorial defense against Moscow. Romney's imagined number one geopolitical foe is in fact a geopolitical weakling.

However, the Utah senator obviously is desperate to remain relevant. At 75, he is young by the standards of America's gerontocracy. Perhaps he plans another presidential run and hopes to make Russia the issue.

In any case, he recently contributed a predictably self-serving article to the *New York Times*, urging further military confrontation with Moscow without considering the consequences. Romney failed to thoughtfully assess US policy. He dismissed Moscow's position as inexplicable: "By invading Ukraine, Mr. Putin has already proved that he is capable of illogical and self-defeating decisions."

Self-defeating and surprising, but not illogical. Washington and other NATO members constantly repeated their intention to induct Kyiv. Had Ukraine been the fragile state that the Russian leader imagined, with the indifferent military evident during the 2014 confrontation, his gamble might have paid off. Many in the West also held those assumptions. That Putin is evil does not mean he is irrational. Nor that Washington is innocent of having contributed to the catastrophe, through its misguided, even reckless policy toward both Russia and Ukraine.

Romney set up a strawman, missed the importance of alliance relationships, and ignored how much more Moscow has at stake than America in the current conflict. As a result, he proved oblivious to the implications of his confrontational advice. Argued Romney: "Failing to continue to support Ukraine would be like paying the cannibal to eat us last. If Mr. Putin, or any other nuclear power, can invade and subjugate with near impunity, then Ukraine would be only the first of such conquests. Inevitably, our friends and allies would be devoured by brazen, authoritarian nuclear powers, the implications of which would drastically alter the world order."

Support for Ukraine is widespread, but to do what? Failing to make peace means prolonging the war and encouraging Russia to escalate. However desirable it might seem to have Moscow suffer a defeat, Putin is likely to use increasingly radical means to avoid that outcome. Including targeting the US and NATO allies as they overtly, even ostentatiously, use the conflict as a proxy war against Russia. If the conflict spreads, Romney might rue his blithe assumption that Washington can escalate without consequence.

Defending other nations against a nuclear armed power is one reason the US once considered issuing security guarantees to be a serious decision. Doing so usually required a treaty, ratified by the Senate. Romney appears to believe that Washington should risk nuclear war on behalf anyone threatened by a nuclear power. This is frankly quite mad. Has he asked his constituents if they believe Ukraine is worth the risk?

What Romney missed is the importance of interest. Ukraine matters much more to Russia than America. Thus, Moscow will spend and risk far more in any conflict. In contrast, decades of experience have demonstrated to all that Washington is more invested in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom than Kyiv. The US should assess interests and acting accordingly, rather than casually risk nuclear war for no good reason.

Yet the Utah senator is as ready to attack Russian forces as were Christie and Wicker. What if Moscow used nuclear weapons? Explained Romney: "There are some who would argue for a nuclear response. But there is a wide range of options, and they need not be mutually exclusive. For example, NATO could engage in Ukraine, potentially obliterating Russia's struggling military. Further, we could confront China and every other nation with a choice much like that George W. Bush gave the world after Sept. 11: You are either with us, or you are with Russia – you cannot be with both."

Using nuclear weapons seems beyond imagination given the specter of global annihilation which has haunted humanity since 1945, but Romney should skip the sanctimony. In the last two decades alone the US has killed, or helped kill, *hundreds of thousands* of civilians in a variety of wars, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Yemen. There is a unique horror to the use of nuclear weapons, but those dying in sectarian conflict, from conventional weapons, and of starvation and disease are no less dead. Before pretending to speak on behalf of humanity US policymakers should acknowledge their sometimes unashamed complicity in horrendous killing as well.

Moreover, Romney apparently imagines that Putin, and the tough nationalists around him, would supinely accept direct allied military intervention. Moscow's military doctrine sets a lower nuclear threshold and relies on tactical nukes to make up for conventional weakness. Romney obviously feels lucky. Most Americans probably feel otherwise, especially over stakes that remain secondary to US survival.

The rest of the world certainly would condemn Russia for using nuclear weapons. However, Romney overestimates the willingness of other states to kowtow before Washington. The allies were surprised, perhaps even shocked, at the refusal of most nations in the Global South – Asia, Africa, and Latin America – to do as instructed by the US and Europe. Other nations have tired of Washington's arrogant tartuffery. The allies might be equally disappointed by the response to an escalating conflict in Ukraine. Especially if the West turns the bilateral battle into a far wider and deadlier world war.

Romney's moral assessment of Putin's character and Moscow's policy is accurate. However, the senator continues to overestimate Russia as a threat and underestimate the risk of a wider conflict. We should be thankful that he lost the presidential race a decade ago – and hope that the Biden administration dismisses his reckless advice today.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.