



## Must the U.S. Retreat to Save Putin?

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Since the start of the Ukraine crisis, there has been a chorus of isolationists who have opposed helping Ukraine defend itself from the unprovoked, revanchist invasion ordered by Russian President Vladimir Putin. The motives of these noninterventionists are varied. Those like Rainer Shea, a prolific writer against “the capitalist/imperialist power establishment” who wants to “move us towards a socialist revolution” openly sides with Russia because “Obama's team forced through the installation of an extreme-right government in Kiev eight years ago.” Shea argues “Russia has outmaneuvered the imperialists” with Putin’s threats of nuclear war. Many liberals think defense spending is a waste and the money should be spent on domestic social programs. On international issues, libertarians side with the Left because they reject the intrusion of security concerns upon individual or business freedom. As Ludwig von Mises asserted in *Omnipotent Government*, “under free trade and free migration, no individual is concerned about the territorial size of his country.” Great comfort for those Ukrainians now living in occupied Mariupol.

As the Russian invasion has floundered, the critics of U.S.-NATO policy have grown more desperate to prove that their case for doing nothing (and letting Putin win) is the correct one.

The headline of Stephen M. Walt’s essay in the mainstream journal *Foreign Policy* reads “Russia’s Defeat Would Be America’s Problem: Victory in Ukraine could easily mean hubris in Washington.” America might take its role as world leader seriously again! We can’t have that. Walt is a prominent scholar associated with elite institutions. His 2007 book *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* and his 2018 book *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* detail his skewed outlook. He teaches a course at the Harvard Kennedy School titled “What’s Wrong with U.S. Foreign Policy” where he denounces the post-Cold War “ambitious grand strategy of ‘liberal hegemony’” which he calls a failure. He is heavily invested in keeping it a failure.

Walt is Robert and Renee Belfer Professor of International Affairs and affiliated with the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Among the other members of this elite brain trust is Graham Allison, the founding dean of the Kennedy School. Walt borrows from Allison in the opening of his *Foreign Policy* essay regarding the Peloponnesian War. Allison is well known for his 2017 book *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* which

advocates appeasement towards China. Allison argues that too many wars, starting with the conflict between Athens and Sparta described by the ancient historian Thucydides, have been the result of an established power (like Sparta then and America today) trying to resist a rising power like Athens then, China today. It is better to accommodate the challenger. This, he says, will take "huge, painful adjustments in attitudes and actions" including accepting that America is doomed to fall behind China. It is better to lose without a fight, is his decadent advice. In an article published the day Putin announced his annexations, Allison claims "a 'limited war' over Taiwan or along China's periphery, the United States would likely lose -- or have to choose between losing and stepping up the escalation ladder to a wider war" which he opposes. Escalation threats from Putin, however, must be heeded as he argued in a piece posted the day the Russian Duma approved Putin's annexations. Indeed, he seemed to present a moral equivalency between Putin's threat to defend his conquered territory with nukes and the U.S. pledge to defend its NATO allies.

Yet, Allison's own research, if properly read, shows the opposite. In each of his twelve examples of conflict between a "ruling" power and a rising power, it is the rising power that starts the major war with acts of aggression. In none of the cases does the ruling power act in a pre-emptive manner to cripple a rival before it feels strong enough to strike. Even Allison's core example of Sparta reacting to Athens' rise notes that the two Greek city-states had a 30-year peace treaty during which as Thucydides writes Sparta did little until "the better part of Greece was already in their [Athenian] hands." The ruling powers behaved exactly as Allison wants the U.S. to do; they did nothing to protect their position. But instead of peace, war was the result as appeasement invited aggression, the true lesson of history.

Robert Belfer made a fortune in oil, ranking in the *Fortune 400* as the largest shareholder in Enron before it collapsed in scandal. Conservatives still back capitalism as the strongest horse in the economics race, but no longer accept capitalists whose ambitions are incompatible with the needs of national society, the true focus of policy. Controversial billionaires back another defeatist think tank, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft (QIRS or "curse"). It launched in 2019 with funds from George Soros and Charles Koch. Both are libertarians, though they tend to back candidates on opposite sides of the aisle. Soros hates national security at home as well as overseas, working to weaken police, prosecutors, and prisons as well as the armed forces and border patrol. Koch is a more conventional isolationist who just doesn't want to be bothered by issues larger than his own. He also funds the Cato Institute, whose Doug Bandow declared on September 21 "Don't let Ukraine into NATO or a NATO-Plus... Americans don't want to join the Russo-Ukraine killfest. They even question the current level of US military assistance... Washington should finally begin emphasizing the interests of Americans over that of foreign states."

With the Russians in retreat, QIRS is pushing for a negotiated settlement that should avoid "humiliating" Putin. The U.S. should threaten to reduce its military support to pressure Kyiv to make territorial concessions, and Moscow should be assured that Ukraine would never be allowed to join NATO, thus keeping the door open for renewed aggression. Putin's invasion has validated the fears in Eastern Europe that prompted so many countries to join NATO. But

appeasement is the only word in QIRS's vocabulary. Deterrence is considered dangerous and requires actual effort. It's a very short step for a non-interventionist to become an apologist for the enemy and then a collaborator.

This approach runs through its positions on Iran and China as well. It rejects the alignment of Israel and the Arabs against Tehran as "a terrible idea because it cements existing divisions in the region and reduces the likelihood of diplomatic breakthroughs" QIRS VP Trita Parsi told CNN. It also opposes "pushing" South Korea into the coalition opposing Chinese aggression. At QIRS the only role for diplomacy is to placate enemies, not build alliances.

One of its founders, Andrew Bacevich, wrote a long essay decrying calling Putin a "fascist" as it only encourages stronger action against him. We don't want to repeat the mistake of the Cold War which he claimed cost too much to win. He concluded "The truth is that neither Russian 'fascism' nor its Chinese variant poses a significant danger to American democracy, which is actually threatened from within." Yes, by groups like QIRS that want to turn democracy into weakness rather than its demonstrated strength to rally the public in common defense of national interests and values.

QIRS's roster of "experts" is a who's who of defeatists who think we should just hide under our beds. A more irresponsible statecraft would be hard to imagine, given the array of enemies who have made it clear they desire to reshape the world in ways that would reduce our independence and prosperity while ushering in a new Dark Age. The predators are all watching what happens to Putin as he tests the waters. They might get discouraged if he drowns.