

# The American Conservative

## A Display Of Contempt

Biden sending Victoria Nuland to Moscow is a dangerous insult to the Russian Federation.

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October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021

Joe Biden's administration insists that it wants to improve America's badly frayed bilateral relationship with Russia. However, the president's recent choice of an envoy for that task, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland, strongly suggests a lack of sincerity on Washington's part. Nuland was in Moscow for talks with senior Russian officials, including presidential aide Yury Ushakov, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, and President Vladimir Putin's deputy chief of staff, Dmitry Kozak, October 11-13. Before she could even depart for her trip, though, the Kremlin had to lift a travel ban and other sanctions it had imposed on Nuland. That move occurred as part of a deal in which the United States lifted similar restrictions on Konstantin Vorontsov, a high-level foreign ministry official.

Nuland was a terrible choice for such a sensitive diplomatic mission. She is universally loathed among Russia's leaders for her blatant hawkishness, and especially for her prominent role in supporting demonstrators who successfully ousted Ukraine's elected, pro-Russia president, Viktor Yanukovich, in 2014 when she served as an assistant secretary of state in Barack Obama's administration. Given her track record and the Russian government's attitude toward her, it is at least a minor miracle that her latest venture did not end with further damage to Washington's relations with Putin's government. Instead, both sides described the talks as "productive" and "constructive," which is standard diplomatic jargon for negotiations that didn't accomplish much, but did not end in a shouting match or a fist fight.

About the only choice worse than Nuland would have been an even more rabid Russia-hater like California Democrat Rep. Adam Schiff, a major author of bogus "Russia collusion" allegations. It is possible that selecting Nuland for such delicate negotiations simply was the latest in a string of blunders by Biden's gaffe-prone foreign policy team. However, it instead may have been a deliberate move to demonstrate U.S. "firmness" and an unwillingness to compromise with an adversary that administration leaders consider odious, but also weak and vulnerable.

Such an approach would be consistent with Washington's long-standing habit of conducting "capitulation diplomacy." For decades, U.S. officials have insisted on making unrealistic

demands on other governments in their diplomatic interactions. Washington typically doesn't engage in meaningful bargaining at all; instead, it tries to force adversaries to capitulate and tamely accept the resulting humiliation. Capitulation diplomacy has been especially evident in Washington's dealings with Russia since Bill Clinton's administration began pushing NATO to expand eastward toward the Russian border. George W. Bush dramatically increased that provocation by inducing NATO to admit not only Moscow's former satellites in Central and Eastern Europe, but also the three Baltic republics, which had once been an integral part of both Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Throughout that process, U.S. leaders argued (apparently with straight faces) that NATO expansion was not directed at Russia, and that Moscow, therefore, must accept the Alliance's increasingly intrusive presence without a murmur of protest.

Obama's administration, though, managed to exceed even its two predecessors in taking steps to antagonize Russia, and one of the most visible, vocal leaders of that effort was Victoria Nuland. As Ukraine's political crisis deepened in late 2013 and early 2014, Nuland and her State Department subordinates became extremely active assisting the anti-Yanukovich protestors. Visiting Maidan Square in Kiev on December 5, she handed out cookies and other food items to demonstrators and expressed America's firm support for their cause. Nuland noted in a speech to the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation on December 13, 2013, that she had traveled to Ukraine three times in the weeks since the demonstrations began. She stated that "the United States' message has been clear and unequivocal. We stand with the people of Ukraine in their search for justice, human dignity, security, a return to economic health, and for the European future they have chosen and that they deserve."

In an especially revealing episode, Russian intelligence intercepted and leaked to the international media a Nuland telephone call in which she and U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt expressed their clear preferences for certain personnel to replace the Yanukovich government. The U.S.-favored candidates included Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the man who would in fact become prime minister once Yanukovich was overthrown. Nuland crowed that "Yats is the guy who's got the economic experience, the governing experience."

Nuland and Pyatt were doing this at a time when Yanukovich was still Ukraine's lawful president. It was startlingly hypocritical to see U.S. diplomatic officials—representing a country that routinely touts the need to respect democratic processes and the sovereignty of other nations—scheming about helping to remove an elected government and replace it with a regime that had U.S. approval. Worse, Nuland was spearheading this effort in a country that Russian leaders have considered a crucial part of their country's core security zone. Her behavior was inappropriate, boorish, and recklessly hostile. It was no wonder that the Kremlin imposed the travel ban and other sanctions on her in response.

If the Biden administration genuinely wants to improve Washington's frigid relations with Russia, it will need to make significant, substantive concessions. Those concessions would have to include ending arms sales to Ukraine, stopping the dangerous and provocative flights of U.S. warplanes near Russia's borders to probe the country's air defense capabilities. Meaningful concessions also would require at least reducing the number and size of NATO war games in Russia's neighborhood and ending the "rotational" deployments of U.S. troops in Eastern

European countries—deployments that are so frequent as to constitute a de facto permanent military presence.

Creating the right optics also is crucial. Appointing someone like Victoria Nuland to a high-level position with the authority to chart policy toward Russia was bad enough. Sending her as a negotiator to repair bilateral relations was either shockingly insensitive or a calculated insult. Either way, the move did not reflect a genuine commitment on the part of the Biden administration to improve Washington's dangerously dysfunctional relationship with a nuclear-armed great power.

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