



IDEAS

# How the Anti-war Camp Went Intellectually Bankrupt

Critics of U.S. foreign policy from both ends of the ideological spectrum have found common cause in supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

By James Kirchick



Paul Spella / The Atlantic; Getty

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In 1942, answering a pacifist opponent of British involvement in the Second World War, George Orwell replied that “pacifism is objectively pro-fascist.” There have of course been many times in human history when opposition to war has been morally justified, intellectually coherent, and, in the end, vindicated. But the war to defeat fascism during the middle part of the past century was simply not one of them. “This is elementary common sense,” Orwell wrote at the time. “If you hamper the war effort of one side you automatically help that of the other.”

Eight decades later, as a fascistic Russian regime wages war against Ukraine, a motley collection of voices from across the political spectrum has called upon the United States and its allies to adopt neutrality as their position. Ranging from anti-imperialists on the left to isolationists on the right and more respectable “realists” in between, these critics are not pacifists in the strict sense of the term. Few if any oppose the use of force as a matter of principle. But nor are they neutral. It is not sufficient, they say, for the West to cut off its supply of defensive weaponry to Ukraine. It must also atone for “provoking” Russia to attack its smaller, peaceful, democratic neighbor, and work at finding a resolution that satisfies what Moscow calls its “legitimate security interests.” In this, today’s anti-war caucus is objectively pro-fascist.

To appreciate the bizarrely kaleidoscopic nature of this caucus, consider the career of a catchphrase. “Is Washington Fighting Russia Down to the Last Ukrainian?” asked the headline of a column self-published in March by Ron Paul, the former Republican congressman and presidential candidate. It was a strange question for Paul to be posing just three weeks into President Vladimir Putin’s unjustifiable and unforgivable invasion, especially considering the extraordinary lengths to which the Biden administration had gone to avoid “fighting Russia.”

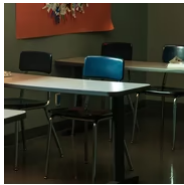
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Even stranger than Paul's assertion that the U.S. was goading Ukrainians into sacrificing themselves on the altar of its Russophobic bloodlust, though, has been the proliferation of his specious talking point across the ideological spectrum.

Ten days after Paul accused his country of treating Ukrainians as cannon fodder, the retired American diplomat Chas Freeman repeated the quip. "We will fight to the last Ukrainian for Ukrainian independence," Freeman declared sarcastically—even as he excused Russia's "special military operation" as an understandable reaction to being "stiff-armed" by the West on the "28-year-old demands that NATO stop enlarging in the direction of Russia." Freeman, a former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia and a senior fellow at Brown University's Watson Institute, made these remarks in an interview with *The GrayZone*, a self-described "independent news website dedicated to original investigative journalism and analysis on politics and empire."

## RECOMMENDED READING

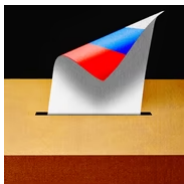
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Although *The GrayZone* would characterize itself as an “anti-imperialist” news source, the opaquely financed publication is highly selective in the empires it chooses to scrutinize; it is difficult to find criticism of Russia or China—or any other American adversary—on its site. A more accurate descriptor of its ideological outlook is “campist,” denoting a segment of the sectarian far left that sees the world as divided into two camps: the imperialist West and the anti-imperialist rest.

Freeman, who served as Richard Nixon’s interpreter during his 1972 visit to China, seemed to feel at home in *The GrayZone*. In that Manichaean domain—one that lacks, naturally, any shades of gray—no anti-Western tyrant is too brutal for fawning adulation, and America is always to blame. A Republican foreign-policy hand in conversation with a fringe leftist website might seem like an odd pairing, but Freeman has a fondness for dictators.

Dominic Tierney: The rise of the liberal hawks

In 2009, when Freeman was appointed to serve on the National Intelligence Council during the first year of the Obama administration, a series of leaked emails revealed a window into his worldview. Observing the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre, Freeman praised the Chinese Communist Party for its bloody crackdown on peaceful student demonstrators; his only criticism of its dispersal of this “mob scene” was that it had been “overly cautious” in displaying “ill-conceived restraint.” It is quite something to read a retired American diplomat criticizing the Chinese regime for being *too soft* during the Tiananmen massacre, but such views are not as aberrational as they sound. Within the school of foreign-policy “realism,” notions of morality are seen as quaint distractions from the real business of great-power politics.

In April, it was Noam Chomsky’s turn to recite the Pauline mantra in a podcast with the editor of *Current Affairs*, a leftist magazine. Going out of his way to praise Freeman as “one of the most astute and respected figures in current U.S. diplomatic circles,” the world’s most famous radical intellectual endorsed the crusty veteran of

realist GOP administrations for characterizing American policy in Eastern Europe as “fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian.”

From Chomsky’s mouth to Putin’s ears.

“A great deal is being said about the United States’ intention to fight against Russia ‘to the last Ukrainian’—they say it there and they say it here,” the Russian president mused the following week, prefacing his mention of the gibe with his own version of that Trumpian rhetorical flourish, “A lot of people are saying.” That same month, an *American Conservative* article by Doug Bandow of the libertarian Cato Institute was headlined “Washington Will Fight Russia to the Last Ukrainian,” denying Ukrainians any agency in their own struggle by answering the question Paul had rhetorically asked.

Soon after, the dean of realist international-relations theorists, the University of Chicago scholar John Mearsheimer, used the line as though he’d just thought of it. By then, the argument that America was “fighting Russia to the last Ukrainian” had ping-ponged between both ends of the ideological spectrum an astonishing number of times. The point for the anti-imperialist left and the isolationist right, as well as the realist fellow travelers hitched to each side, was that blame for the conflict lies mainly with the U.S., which is using Ukraine as a proxy for its nefarious interventionism in Moscow’s backyard.

That the fringe left would blame America—which it views as the source of all capitalist exploitation, military aggression, and imperialist evil in the world—for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is predictable. It blames America for everything. When, two days after the Russian invasion began on February 24, the Democratic Socialists of America called upon “the US to withdraw from NATO and to end the imperialist expansionism that set the stage for this conflict,” mainstream Democrats condemned the statement. More significant has been the position taken by mainstream realists, who similarly fault the West for somehow “provoking” Russia into waging war on its neighbor. These politically disparate forces share more than a talking point. They also have a worldview in common.

Consider America's leading realist think tank, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. This "transpartisan" group enjoyed great fanfare upon its founding, in 2019, with seed funding from the libertarian Charles Koch and the left-wing George Soros. After two decades of "forever wars," here at last was an ideologically diverse assortment of reasonable, sober-minded experts committed to pursuing a "foreign policy of restraint." But counseling inaction as a rapacious, revisionist dictatorship wages total war on its smaller, democratic neighbor had a whiff of appeasement for at least one of Quincy's fellows, leading to a split within the organization.

From the May 2022 issue: There is no liberal world order

"The institute is ignoring the dangers and the horrors of Russia's invasion and occupation," Joe Cirincione, a nuclear non-proliferation expert and one of the group's leading left-of-center scholars, said upon his resignation this summer, adding that Quincy "focuses almost exclusively on criticism of the United States, NATO, and Ukraine. They excuse Russia's military threats and actions because they believe that they have been provoked by U.S. policies."

The moral myopia Cirincione identifies is an essential trait of the new online magazine *Compact*, where self-styled anti-woke Marxists and Catholic theocrats unite in their loathing of classical liberal values at home and their opposition to defending those values abroad. In an article titled "Fueling Zelensky's War Hurts America," the left-wing writer Batya Ungar-Sargon took issue with the U.S. supplying defensive weaponry to Kyiv, arguing that resources devoted to supporting Ukrainians would be better spent helping economically disadvantaged Americans.

Pushing the United States to prioritize the needs of its poorest citizens, even if that means forgoing its responsibilities for maintaining the European security order, is at least an intellectually defensible position (if a shortsighted and reductive one). But Ungar-Sargon also went out of her way to give credence to Russia's specious territorial claims.

“If Ukraine’s territorial integrity were of such immense national interest,” she wrote, “surely we would have climbed the rapid-escalation ladder back in 2014, when Moscow invaded and annexed Crimea—a move that a referendum found was popular among Crimeans.” The plebiscite Ungar-Sargon endorsed was held under Russian gunpoint to provide a legal fig leaf for the first armed annexation of territory on the European continent since World War II. She also identified Donetsk and Luhansk—the two Russian-backed separatist enclaves in Eastern Ukraine that Putin recognized as puppet states on the eve of his invasion and where he has now held similarly meaningless referenda annexing them to Russia—as “independent republics,” conferring a legitimacy that was in marked contrast to the way she referred dismissively to “the United States and its European satrapies.”

Many commentators have likened Volodymyr Zelensky to Winston Churchill for his charismatic resistance to foreign invaders and his ability to raise the morale of his people. In light of this popular association, the headline that the editors of *Compact* devised for Ungar-Sargon’s apologia—“Zelensky’s War”—is nauseating, blaming the victim while seeming to evoke the title of a notorious book by the Holocaust-denying historian David Irving, *Churchill’s War*.

Condemning the U.S. and its allies for the unfolding tragedy in Ukraine requires one to ignore or downplay a great deal of Russian misbehavior. This is a characteristic that unites left-wing anti-imperialists, right-wing isolationists, and the ostensibly more respectable “realists.”

“Russian President Vladimir Putin, the argument goes, annexed Crimea out of a long-standing desire to resuscitate the Soviet Empire, and he may eventually go after the rest of Ukraine as well as other countries in Eastern Europe,” Mearsheimer wrote in a 2014 essay titled “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault.” “But this account is wrong.” Eight years on, as Russian forces marched toward Kyiv and Putin issued vague threats of nuclear escalation, Mearsheimer made no acknowledgment of how very wrong his own earlier, sanguine assessment of Putin’s intentions had been.

James Kirchick: Being gay was the gravest sin in Washington

“We invented this story that Putin is highly aggressive and he’s principally responsible for this crisis in Ukraine,” he told *The New Yorker* a week into the invasion. Putin’s apparent goal of overthrowing Zelensky and installing a puppet regime would not be an example of “imperialism,” Mearsheimer argued, and was meaningfully different from “conquering and holding onto Kyiv.” All of this linguistic legerdemain would surely come as news to the Czechs, Poles, Slovaks, and other peoples of the region who once suffered under the Russian imperial yoke.

As evidence of Russian war crimes against Ukrainian civilians mounts, Mearsheimer has cleaved to his position that NATO enlargement is to blame for the war. “I think all the trouble in this case really started in April, 2008, at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, where afterward NATO issued a statement that said Ukraine and Georgia would become part of NATO,” he also told *The New Yorker*. Although the NATO communiqué did express the alliance’s hope that the two former Soviet republics would become members at some indefinite point in the future, it came after France and Germany had successfully blocked a proposal by the Bush administration to offer Ukraine and Georgia an actual path to membership. But even if the U.S. *had* made such a promise, how would that justify the invasion and occupation of Ukraine? Mearsheimer also ignores the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, according to which the United States, Britain, and Russia guaranteed Ukraine’s territorial integrity in exchange for Ukraine surrendering its nuclear weapons. This concord lasted for 20 years, until Putin abrogated it by invading and occupying Crimea.

Even more obtuse are the excuses for Russian aggression made by Mearsheimer’s fellow academic realist, the Columbia University professor Jeffrey Sachs. Sachs has worked as an adviser to a host of international institutions, such as the World Health Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, as a development economist. Unlike Mearsheimer, he has no particular expertise in foreign political affairs, but this has not stopped him from pronouncing on geopolitical issues. Last December, as Russia was amassing its forces on Ukraine’s border, Sachs suggested that “NATO should take Ukraine’s membership off the table, and Russia should forswear any invasion.” This ignored the fact that Russia had *already invaded* the country in 2014.



Seeking to explain “the West’s false narrative” about Ukraine after the war began, Sachs noted, “Since 1980 the US has been in at least 15 overseas wars of choice (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Panama, Serbia, Syria and Yemen to name just a few), while China has been in none, and Russia only in one (Syria) beyond the former Soviet Union.” This sentence contains two significant qualifications. First, Sachs’s counting only those “wars of choice” that Russia waged “beyond the former Soviet Union” implies that its invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 were permissible through some sort of Cold War–continuity *droit de seigneur*. Second, Sachs’s selection of 1980 as the starting point for his comparison conveniently excludes the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which began in December 1979 and became the Red Army’s own forever war, lasting almost 10 years and playing a crucial role in the Soviet Union’s demise.

Russia’s war against Ukraine has exposed the incompetence of the Russian military and the hubris of President Putin. It has also revealed the bravery and resilience of the Ukrainian people, who, contrary to Ron Paul’s ambulatory talking point, had no need of any American to prod or gull them into defending their homeland. Here in the U.S., the war has also exposed the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of an ideologically diverse set of foreign-policy commentators: the “anti-imperialists” who routinely justify blatant acts of imperial conquest, and the “realists” who make arguments unmoored from reality.

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