

How Do We Stop the Neocons from Starting Another Disaster in Ukraine

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If anything, Washington’s neoconservatives have an unerring instinct for survival. Having brought about multiple disasters in the two decades since 9/11—from the Iraq War to the twin debacles in Libya and Syria—the neoconservatives seem to have perfected the art of failing up.

Harvard University’s Stephen Walt once [quipped](#) that “Being a Neocon Means Never Having to Say You’re Sorry.” And in this regard, the story of the Kagan family is instructive. Robert Kagan, a contributing columnist for the Washington Post, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and author of pseudohistories such as *The Jungle Grows Back*, has for years been a leading advocate of American militarism.

His brother, Frederick, is a resident scholar at the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute. Writing in the Hill on December 7, Frederick Kagan [claimed](#) that Russian control of Ukraine, “would create an existential threat to Poland and even to Romania—one that could be met only by major deployments of U.S. and European ground and air forces to what could become a new Iron Curtain.” He and his wife, Kimberly, who heads the Institute for the Study of War—another pro-war Washington think tank—were close [advisers](#) to the [disgraced](#) General and former CIA Director David Petraeus. Indeed, both Frederick and his wife are frequently cited as the brains behind the surge strategy pursued by George W. Bush’s administration in 2007-2008.

But the most powerful member of the Kagan clan is Victoria Nuland, who is the wife of Robert and is the U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs. Under Obama, Nuland served as the State Department spokesperson, a position for which she was manifestly overqualified (and that becomes especially clear if one takes the qualifications of the [current spokesman](#) into consideration), before assuming the role of the assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs. It was in this role that Nuland helped orchestrate the overthrow of a democratically elected president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, in [February 2014](#) that led to a civil war in Ukraine, in which more than 13,000 [people](#) have died, according to the United Nations.

Part of the reason the U.S. is at grave risk of a war with Russia—and there is precious little debate about the policies that have brought us to this point—is that foreign policy in Washington is conducted by a virtually closed circle.

And that circle is dominated by people like the Kagans.

Washington's legacy media organizations play their part in perpetuating these foreign policies as well by functioning as the permanent bureaucracy's echo chamber. For proof, look no further than the Washington Post editorial page, which from the very start of the Ukraine crisis has been cavalierly dismissing calls for diplomacy and engagement and, instead, has been calling for outright war.

An example of this is the Washington Post view [published](#) on their editorial page on August 21, 2014:

“...it is tempting to look for a cease-fire or some kind of time out that would lead to a period of diplomatic negotiation. But what would a pause and diplomacy accomplish? Any negotiations that leave this blight festering in Ukraine must be avoided. The only acceptable solution is for Mr. Putin's aggression to be reversed.”

As Jacob Heilbrunn, the editor of the National Interest, and I

[commented](#)

at the time, “Almost as bad as the callousness on display is the lack of candor. At no point did the [Washington] Post actually explain how it would propose to go about reversing Putin's aggression.”

This remains the case even today. At no point do the armchair warriors braying for war with Russia over Ukraine discuss how such a “reversal” might be carried out, or, even more tellingly, what the odds might be of a successful outcome of a war between the U.S. and Russia.

Not much has changed since the start of the Ukrainian crisis nearly eight years ago. Consider for a moment the testimony on “Update on U.S.-Russia Policy” by Nuland made before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) on December 7.

Nuland

[testified](#)

that:

“We don't know whether Russian President [Vladimir] Putin has made a decision to attack Ukraine or overthrow its government but we do know he is building the capacity to do so. Much of this comes right out of Putin's 2014 playbook but this time, it is on a much larger and more lethal scale. So despite our uncertainty about exact intentions and timing, we must prepare for all contingencies, even as we push Russia to reverse course.”

Nuland went on to note that the U.S. government has [given](#) \$2.4 billion to Ukraine since 2014 “in security assistance,” which included \$450 million that was given in 2021 alone.

What, one wonders, has been the United States' return on this massive investment?

SFRC Chairman Bob Menendez, who, in 2015, was indicted on federal corruption charges, seems to be under the impression that Russians do not have the overwhelming military advantage on their own border. Likewise, Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD) [intoned](#) that a Russian invasion of Ukraine would “require us [the U.S.] to escalate.”

Senator Todd Young (R-IN), meanwhile, [pressed](#)

Nuland on “what measures are being considered by the administration to counter Russian aggression,” while Senator Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) [indicated](#)

that during her conversations with members of parliament (MP) from Estonia, they spoke about the importance of “European unity with respect to Ukraine.” Also, the MPs from Estonia along with Poland and other Eastern European countries expressed anxiousness about “whether or not to station more troops in the Baltic nations,” Senator Shaheen said.

The most astute comment of the day came from Senator Ron Johnson (R-WI), who was clearly proud that the committee had achieved a rare bipartisan agreement for a change. He further emphasized that the U.S. stands “united” in support of Ukraine and against Russia.

And Johnson was absolutely correct: The committee was completely united in its desire for conflict over Ukraine, with whom the U.S. has no treaty obligations whatsoever.

Indeed, both Nuland and the SFRC seem to see U.S. national interests where none exist. More worrying still, they seem to possess a kind of blind faith in America's ability, indeed duty, to shape outcomes of conflicts that are taking place thousands of miles from our shores through a combination of sanctions and military threats.

The SFRC hearing showed, if nothing else, that American foreign policy is held hostage by a venal, avaricious and, above all, reckless clique of elites: From the members of the SFRC to the high U.S. government officials who testify before them; from the staffers who brief them to the scholars and policy hands on whom the staffers rely; right down to the reporters and journalists who uncritically regurgitate what they are told by their ‘anonymous’ administration sources.

As such, one of the most urgent questions before us is: How do Americans of good conscience finally break their stranglehold on power before it's too late?

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