

# Putin A Hero? Ukraine A Villain? How MAGA Has Inverted Foreign Policy

By David French Opinion Columnist  
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As I Type This Newsletter, Continued American Aid For Ukraine Is In Grave Doubt. Tucker Carlson Is In Moscow To Conduct A Friendly Interview With Vladimir Putin. And We're Receiving Reports From The Front Lines That Russia Is Advancing, In Part Because Of Ukrainian Ammunition Shortages. In Short, The War Is Reaching A Critical Stage, And Ukraine May Lose Because Republicans Are Willing To Hand Authoritarian Russia A Historic Military Victory Rather Than Supply Further Aid To A Democratic Ally.

Ronald Reagan Isn't Just Rolling Over In His Grave, He May Also Lurch From It In A Fit Of Incredulous Rage. This Is A Remarkable And Potentially Catastrophic Reversal By A Political Party That Is In A State Of Near Total, Frequently Random Ideological Transformation.

To Explain The Intensity Of Republican Resistance To Ukraine Aid, I Need To Return To A Concept I Wrote About In November: That Of Bespoke Realities." My Friend Renée DiResta, The Technical Manager At The Stanford Internet Observatory, Coined The Term, And It Refers To The "Bubble Realities" Constructed By Communities "That Operate With Their Own Norms, Media, Trusted Authorities And Frameworks Of Facts."

Among Those Who Oppose Aid To Ukraine, There Are Certainly Several Old-School Paleoconservatives Who Object On Classic Isolationist Grounds: It's Not Our Fight, Our Support Is Costly, We Might Find Ourselves Inadvertently Embroiled In War, And So On. But The Mass Republican Movement Against Ukraine Is Rooted Far Less In Policy Than It Is In A Particular Bespoke Reality Of The MAGA Universe, In Which Ukraine Is A Pernicious Villain, Putin Is A Flawed Hero And Russia Should Have Crushed Ukraine Long Ago.

MAGA Republicans' Hatred And Contempt For Volodymyr Zelensky And The Ukrainian Cause Is Shockingly Vehement. Candace Owens Says She Wants To "Punch" Zelensky. Donald Trump Jr Calls Him An "International Welfare Queen." Carlson Says He Dresses "Like The Manager Of A Strip Club." It's All Bizarre And Unreasonable. And It All Fits The Broader MAGA Narrative.

**Let's Break It Down, Step By Step.** First, If You're Stumped By The Notion That Ukraine Is A Villain, You May Need Reminding Of A Conspiracy Theory That Is Now Largely Forgotten But Was Prevalent On The Right At The Time Of Donald Trump's First Impeachment. In His Infamous Conversation With Zelensky, The One That Triggered Impeachment — Trump Asked Zelensky About A "CrowdStrike" Server Allegedly Being Held In Ukraine.

This Is A Reference To A Longstanding MAGA Claim That It Was Ukraine And Not Russia That Interfered With The 2016 Election. There's No Evidence Of Any Kind To Support The Allegation, And Trump's Own Advisers Repeatedly Debunked It. But My Times Colleague Scott Shane Described How The Theory Gained Purchase On The Right Nonetheless. "On 4Chan And Pro-Trump Spaces On Reddit, On Websites Like ZeroHedge.com And Washington's Blog," He Wrote In 2019, "You Can Find Plenty Of Speculation About Evil Manipulation By CrowdStrike And Secret Maneuvers By Ukrainians — Often Inflamed By Mr Trump's Own Statements."

Combine That Claim With The Fact That Hunter Biden Had A Lucrative Business Relationship With The Ukrainian Energy Company Burisma, And MAGA Found Itself With The Perfect Villain To Counter The Trump-Russia Narrative. Trump Wasn't In Bed With A Hostile Power In Russia, The *Democrats* Were In Bed With A Hostile Power In *Ukraine*.

But It Goes Further Still. To MAGA, Putin Isn't Just Innocent, **He's Admirable**. Heroic, Even, In Some Ways. Putin Isn't Defined As An Authoritarian Dictator At The Helm Of One Of America's Chief Geopolitical Rivals. No, He's Defined As An Anti-Woke Leader Who Defends Christian Civilization By Taking On The Decadent West.

In A 2017 Speech At Hillsdale College, The Claremont Institute's Christopher Caldwell Declared That If "We Were To Use Traditional Measures For Understanding Leaders, Which Involve The Defense Of Borders And National Flourishing, *Putin Would Count As The Pre-Eminent Statesman Of Our Time.*" In Caldwell's Words, Putin "Is Not The President Of A Feminist NGO. He Is Not A Transgender-Rights Activist. He Is Not An Ombudsman Appointed By The United Nations To Make And Deliver Slide Shows About Green Energy."

In 2021, The American Conservative's Rod Dreher Praised A Putin Speech Condemning The West And Said That Putin And Hungary's Viktor Orban Were "Completely Clear And Correct On The Society-Destroying Nature Of Wokeness And Postliberal Leftism." (It Should Be Noted That Dreher Has Nonetheless Unequivocally Condemned Putin's Invasion.) A 2022 Exchange Between Steve Bannon And Erik Prince, The Founder Of Private Military Contractor Blackwater, Was Even More Illustrative. Bannon Hosted Prince On His Podcast Shortly After Putin's Invasion And Proclaimed Putin "Anti-Woke." Prince Replied Supportively That The People Of Russia "Still Know Which Bathroom To Use." And Bannon Kept The Thought Alive, Asking, "How Many Genders Are There In Russia?"

Jordan Peterson, Meanwhile, Went So Far To Imply That Russia's Aggressive Attack May Have Merely Self-Defense Against The Threat Of Western Cultural Decadence. The Culture War, He Mused, May Be "Serious Enough To Increase The Probability That Russia, Say, Will be Motivated To Invade And Potentially Incapacitate Ukraine Merely To Keep The Pathological West Out Of That Country, Which Is A Key Part Of The Historically Russian Sphere Of Influence."

There Is An Old Saying: The Enemy Of My Enemy Is My Friend. Ideally, The Phrase Means That Americans Set Aside Their Domestic Differences To Address Foreign Threats To The Nation. But In This Hyper-Polarized Era, The Far Right Gets This Equation Precisely Backward. They are Aiding Vladimir Putin Because They See Him, Too, As Opposed To Their Domestic Enemies.

Before The War, MAGA's Combination Of Hostility Toward Ukraine And Admiration Of Putin Created A Very Particular Narrative: Rugged, Manly, Traditional Russia Was Physically And Spiritually Stronger Than The Liberalizing West, And It Would Roll Over Ukraine With Only Token Resistance. Indeed, Before The War, Ted Cruz Shared A Tweet In Which He Contrasted Russian And American Military Ads. The U.S. Ad, He Claimed, Showed Our Military To Be "Woke" And "Emasculated." But The Russian Ad Reeked Of Masculine Aggression. How Could The West — Let Alone Tiny Ukraine — Stand Against Such Manly Men?

Then The War Started, And Ukraine And Its Allies In The Allegedly Weak, Woke West Proved Astonishingly Resilient. The Tough, Masculine Russian Military Was Stopped Cold Outside Of Kyiv And Has Suffered Humiliating, Catastrophic Losses. In Other Words, Nothing Has Gone According To Russian Plans — Or MAGA Expectations.

I Do Not Want To Imply That Republican Opposition To Ukraine Is Rooted In This MAGA Bespoke Reality. As I Said, There Are Thoughtful People Who Disagree With Additional Aid On Fiscal Or Strategic Grounds. I Disagree With Them, But I Respect Their Views. *But The MAGA Infotainment Isn't Engaged In Thoughtful Analysis. It's Turning Its Angry Domestic Grievances Into Foreign Policy.*

America Has Made Profound And Catastrophic Foreign Policy Mistakes In The Past. But Never In My Lifetime Have We Been On The Verge Of A Mistake So Profound And Catastrophic That Was The Direct Result Of Theories And Ideas That Were So Shallow, Stupid And Frankly Bizarre.

There Are Still Millions Of Republicans Who Want To Support Ukraine. But If The Last Eight Years Have Taught Us Anything, It's That In Any Clash Between Traditional Republicans And MAGA, Traditional Republicans Typically Surrender. And So It Is Here. At The Beginning Of The War, Only 9 Percent Of Republicans Believed The United States Was Supplying Too Much Aid To Ukraine. Now That Number Is A Plurality Of 48 Percent. MAGA Is Once Again Dragging The GOP Into Its Bespoke Reality, And The Consequences Could Be Catastrophic For Ukraine, Europe And The Future Of American Security.