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Someone Wants War with Russia

Victoria Nuland is not alone

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Something very odd is going on in Washington. I recently attended and spoke at a **conference** in Washington on “realism and restraint” as a broad formula to reform U.S. foreign policy. Most presentations reflected that agenda more-or-less but oddly one of the speakers said that it was necessary for the United States to mark its place in the world while “carrying a big stick” while another panelist asserted that it was a core mission of the American people to “help other countries striving to be free.” Both were referring to how the U.S. should comport itself vis-à-vis Russia and one had to suspect that they had wandered into the auditorium by mistake, intending instead to visit the nearby American Enterprise Institute.

That such views should be forthcoming at a conference featuring “restraint” might not in fact be regarded as particularly surprising if one bothers to listen to either the Republican or Democratic so-called debates. Nationalism and American “exceptionalism” are easy products to sell at any time, but recently there has been a strain of bellicosity that is quite astonishing to behold, particularly as only one candidate has ever served in the military, and he was a lawyer. One might call it “Chickenhawks on Parade.”

It is useful to consider in **their own words** what the GOP candidates said last Tuesday night. Carly Fiorina led the baying pack with “One of the reasons I’ve said I wouldn’t be talking to Vladimir Putin right now is because we are speaking to him from a position of weakness brought on by this administration, so, I wouldn’t talk to him for a while, but, I would do this. I would start rebuilding the Sixth Fleet right under his nose, rebuilding the military — the missile defense program in Poland right under his nose. I would conduct very aggressive military exercises in the Baltic States so that he understood we would protect our NATO allies...and I might also put in a few more thousand troops into Germany, not to start a war, but to make sure that Putin understand that the United States of America will stand with our allies... We must have a no fly zone in Syria because Russia cannot tell the United States of America where and when to fly our planes. We also have a set of allies in the Arab Middle East that know that ISIS is their fight...but they must see leadership support and resolve from the United States of America...we have the strongest military on the face of the planet, and everyone has to know it.”

Ben Carson added his two cents, “And what we have to recognize is that Putin is trying to really spread his influence throughout the Middle East. This is going to be his base. And we have to oppose him there in an effective way... What we’ve been doing so far is very ineffective, but we can’t give up ground right there. But we have to look at this on a much more global scale. We’re talking about global jihadists. And their desire is to destroy us and to destroy our way of life. So we have to be saying, how do we make them look like losers? Because that’s the way that they’re able to gather a lot of influence... And I think in order to make them look like losers, we have to destroy their caliphate. And you look for the easiest place to do that? It would be in Iraq. And if — outside of Anbar in Iraq, there’s a big energy field. Take that from them. Take all of that land from them. We could do that, I believe, fairly easily, I’ve learned from talking to several generals, and then you move on from there.”

And Senator Marco Rubio added his own insights, saying that “I believe the world is a stronger and a better place, when the United States is the strongest military power in the world... I’ve never met Vladimir Putin, but I know enough about him to know he is a gangster. He is basically an organized crime figure that runs a country, controls a \$2 trillion economy. And is using to build up his military in a rapid way despite the fact his economy is a disaster. He understands only geopolitical strength. And every time he has acted anywhere in the world, whether it’s in Ukraine or Georgia before that, or now in the Middle East, it’s because he is trusting in weakness... our allies in the region do not trust us. For goodness sake, there is only one pro-American free enterprise democracy in the Middle East, it is the state of Israel. And we have a president that treats the prime minister of Israel with less respect than what he gives the ayatollah in Iran... And we do have a vested interest. And here’s why. Because all those radical terrorist groups...they are coming to us.

They recruit Americans using social media. And they don't hate us simply because we support Israel. They hate us because of our values. They hate us because our girls go to school. They hate us because women drive in the United States."

Governor John Kasich demonstrated why it would have been best if he had stayed in Ohio, saying "In the Ukraine, arm the people there so they can fight for themselves. In the eastern part of Europe, make sure that Finland and the Baltics know that if the Russians move, we move. In Syria, yes, a no-fly zone in the north on the Turkish border, a no-fly zone on the south on the Jordanian border. Anybody flies in the first time, maybe they can fly out. They fly in there a second time, they will not fly out... in the countries of the Gulf States of Bahrain, the Cleveland Clinic is opening an operation. Clearly we see the same with them. And in Israel, we have no better ally in the world, and no more criticizing them in public, we should support them."

Governor Jeb Bush, running fast to make up for his lackluster campaign, added "I'd say it [the number one threat facing the U.S.] is Islamic terrorism, and, back to the question of what we are dealing with in Iraq, when we pull back voids are filled. That's the lesson of history, and, sadly, this president does not believe in American leadership. He does not believe it, and the net result is that we have a caliphate the size of Indiana that gains energy each and every day to recruit Americans in our own country, and the threat to the homeland relates to the fact that we have not dealt with this threat of terror in the Middle East. We should have a no fly zone in Syria. We should have a support for the remnants of the Syrian Free Army, and create safe zones... Without American leadership every other country in the neighborhood begins to change their priorities. It is tragic that you see Iraq, and other countries now talking to Russia. It wasn't that long ago that Russia had no influence in the region at all. And, so, the United States needs to lead across the board."

I can almost picture the lads and lassies from the various neocon entities including the John Hay Initiative, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the American Enterprise Institute grinning as they brief the GOP candidates on foreign policy. What a treat to have a gaggle of perfect tabulae rasae possessing the combined intellectual curiosity of an aardvark dutifully waiting in line to have their empty heads filled with nonsense. Carly wins the prize for sheer venom and willingness to start a war. She would be firing at Russians on the ground and in the air. Why? So we can fly wherever we want.

But I think that Ben Carson wins the dummy prize for his brilliant plan to destroy the "Caliphate" by taking away their "big energy field." And Rubio comes close with his claim that Putin is nothing but a gangster plus his George W. Bush-like assertion that terrorists hate us because of our "values," allowing women to go to school in our country and also drive cars. Kasich meanwhile sees the Cleveland Clinic as a barometer of civilization while I challenge anyone to make sense out of what Jeb Bush said. He has apparently inherited the gift of tongues from his brother.

And then, of course, it never hurts to give the nod of approval to Israel, which is the only "pro-American free enterprise democracy" in the Middle East as well as "no better ally in the world." Amen.

The outlier Donald Trump actually made some sense, saying “...If Putin wants to go and knocked the hell out of ISIS, I am all for it, 100%, and I can’t understand how anybody would be against it... Assad is a bad guy, but we have no idea who the so-called rebels — I read about the rebels, nobody even knows who they are. So, I don’t like Assad. Who’s going to like Assad? But, we have no idea who these people, and what they’re going to be, and what they’re going to represent. They may be far worse than Assad. Look at Libya. Look at Iraq. Look at the mess we have after spending \$2 trillion dollars, thousands of lives, wounded warriors all over the place...”

There was also some pushback from Senator Rand Paul who counseled a defense policy linked to national interest as well as affordability, but many of the other candidates sought to outdo each other in terms of vilifying Russia and Putin while talking tough about how they would deal with him.

Indeed, the willingness to fight Russkies and Persians simultaneously has surfaced more than once in the current series of debates. But consider for a moment how a war with second rate power Iran would be something less than a cakewalk even if everything went perfectly, and one knows that in war little goes to plan. Iran has sophisticated air defenses and naval resources that could wreak havoc in the narrow waters of the Straits of Hormuz. An American carrier could easily be destroyed. It would be a replay of the worst experiences in Iraq combined with the worst of Afghanistan, given Iran’s terrain, size, resources and willingness to fight.

But Iran aside, the focus is invariably on Moscow. Backing Russia’s Putin into a corner where he felt that he had to strike first with his available military resources, to include tactical nuclear weapons, would be something on quite a different level and the word catastrophic comes immediately to mind. Even if Russia were only limiting itself to military targets, it could, in short order, sink all of America’s vaunted and highly vulnerable air craft carriers and destroy the satellite communications systems that the modern U.S. armed forces depend on. One leading **military analyst** even believes that the Russian Army is better designed to fight an actual ground war than is the vastly more expensive version fielded by the United States, which should surprise no one. Colonel Douglas Macgregor postulates that U.S. forces would likely be annihilated.

Many of those inside the beltway doing the pushing for confrontation argue that Washington and Moscow have long been restrained, in theory, by what is known as “mutually assured destruction,” meaning that a nuclear war is unthinkable because it would destroy both countries and possibly the world. But there might be some high up in both governments who think that a limited exchange could actually be somehow controlled, even while understanding that if a nuclear tit-for-tat were to escalate the targeting could easily shift to cities. Certainly the GOP candidates are flirting with entertaining that possibility, even if they are not completely aware of what they are implying.

In truth, the dangerous Washington consensus that Russia must for some reason to be confronted and even destabilized truly boggles the mind, particularly as it has become dogma for both political parties and even for many critics of the global war on terror and all its tainted fruit. And the brinkmanship game with a nuclear weapon armed adversary that is

being played is, as veteran diplomat William Polk **has observed**, "...moving closer to the danger point of provoking their use." It is difficult to understand why it is so. Russia is, if anything, helping in Syria and could even broker some kind of negotiated settlement, while the situation with Ukraine and Crimea is far less Manichean than the U.S. media has depicted it to be. Russia does not threaten the United States and it does not threaten Western Europe, but push hard enough and long enough and a nightmare scenario could easily arise, driven by carelessly stoked fear and the thoughtless language employed by an array of presidential wannabes as well as their punditry enablers.