

Bill Kaplan: Putin invades Ukraine, GOP divided

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As the world watched in horror, Putin invaded Ukraine. Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin spoke for many: “Putin has violated international law, invading a sovereign and democratic nation that wants peace and independence. Putin’s aggression has been met with sanctions I stand with the Ukrainian people and I believe we need to continue standing strong with our European allies and NATO ... to hold Putin accountable for the largest invasion of Europe since World War II.”

Putin defended his aggression with the language of an unhinged warmonger: Putin called the Russian invasion a “special military operation”, lied about “genocide” of Russian speaking Ukrainians and frighteningly threatened the world by putting Russian nuclear forces on high alert. He said the aim of the war was the “demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine.” However, Ukraine has no nuclear weapons and its conventional military is far surpassed by Russia. As to Putin’s “denazification” lie, Ukrainian President Zelensky is Jewish. Meanwhile, Trump put both feet in his mouth defending Putin.

Michigan GOP Senator Arthur Vandenberg championed a bipartisan foreign policy during the Cold War: containment of the Soviet Union, NATO and the United Nations. He said “politics stops at the water’s edge” as he supported President Truman. But Trump is the polar opposite. As Russian forces invaded Ukraine Trump said: “This is genius. Putin declares a big portion of the Ukraine ... as independent. Oh, that’s wonderful.” Later, Laura Ingraham of Fox corrected Trump for mistakenly saying there had been an “amphibious attack by Americans” in Ukraine: “No, those are the Russians.” Trump went on to claim scurrilously: “And it all happened (Putin’s invasion) because of (my) rigged election.”

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Other Republicans echo Trump, including former Secretary of State Pompeo, Fox Trump sycophant Tucker Carlson, Ohio Senate candidate J.D. Vance and Arizona Representative Paul Gosar. Few Republicans have rebuked Trump. But Wyoming GOP Representative Liz Cheney once again showed leadership saying: “Former President Trump’s adulation of Putin today – including calling him a ‘genius’ – aids our enemies. Trump’s interests don’t seem to align with the interests of the United States of America.”

However, Wisconsin GOP politicians cowardly refuse to confront Trump’s lies, acting like his puppets. Both Wisconsin Senator Ron Johnson and Representative Mike Gallagher blame President Biden for being “weak”, despite Biden’s standing up to Putin, unlike Trump. They have no alternative except to sniff that their sanctions would be tougher. Thankfully, Gallagher has retreated from his reckless proposal to send U.S. troops to Ukraine. His tripwire risked an out of control wider war without protecting Ukraine.

Tom Nelson, running for the Democratic Senate nomination to oppose Johnson, got it right: “The invasion of Ukraine is an unlawful act of aggression against a sovereign country and must be opposed. ...(Biden) is right to work in coalition with our NATO and European allies and to impose heavy sanctions for this reckless aggression. All Americans will be impacted by Putin’s aggression and we need to stand strongly together to say in one voice this will not stand.”

- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.