

Bill Kaplan: Stand with Ukraine

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Putin's Russia is the greatest threat to world peace and security. His invasion of Ukraine has shredded Russia's commitment to the Charter of the United Nations, its adherence to the Geneva Conventions and agreement to the 1994 Budapest Memorandum (Russia said it would "respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine" and "to refrain from the threat or use of force" against Ukraine, and at the same time Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons).

Russian troops have decimated much of Ukraine. Putin has led a murderous rampage: pillage, plunder, rape and no distinguishing between civilian and military targets. Now as winter nears Putin has commenced aerial attacks against Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Putin seeks to reverse his battlefield defeats with sheer terror, including threats of using nuclear weapons.

Within this context, GOP House leader and speaker-to-be Kevin McCarthy said: "I think people are gonna be sitting in a recession and they're not going to write a blank check to Ukraine. They just won't do it. ...It's not a free blank check." A shot across the bow to end U.S. support for Ukraine. McCarthy is a duplicitous and shallow politician, using the suffering caused by the inflationary spiral set off in large part by Putin. He is not alone.

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In May, 57 GOP House members, including Wisconsin Representative Tom Tiffany, voted to oppose U.S. aid to Ukraine. Eleven GOP senators also voted no. Earlier, Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson and other Senate Republicans opposed a bill which included aid to Ukraine, all the while condemning President Biden. Johnson later voted for the aid opposed by Tiffany. At best a mixed message. However,

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has helped maintain bipartisan support in the Senate for military aid to Ukraine. But as the Washington Post said: “The GOP’s mixed signals are music to Mr. Putin’s ears.”

Then a small group of House Democrats, acting like contestants on the amateur hour, struck a discordant note. The group, including Wisconsin Democratic Representatives Gwen Moore and Mark Pocan, sent a letter (retracted within a day) to Biden pressing him to open up direct negotiations with Putin to end the war. These members of the Progressive Caucus made some faulty assumptions: the U.S. should supersede Ukraine, Putin is open to negotiations and that Biden has not tried to end the war. Moreover, the letter’s timing was stunning political malpractice.

From the beginning Biden gave Putin an off ramp: Ukraine is not joining NATO, no U.S. nuclear weapons in Ukraine and arms control negotiations. Putin said no. Biden also made crystal clear that the U.S. does not “seek a war between NATO and Russia.” He paid tribute to the enormous sacrifices of Russia during WW II. Alternatives to war, including the (then) neutral Finland model and Austrian State Treaty have been floated over the years. Putin has no interest. However, Biden must keep trying to avoid nuclear war.

What Biden has done superbly is lead an international coalition to stand with Ukraine and extend critical military aid.

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