



A Brief History of Pundits Encouraging Nuclear War

Description

There is an active, influential, and well-paid minority of pundits and politicians in America who apparently believe that escalating conflict between nuclear powers—and even nuclear war itself—is not really that big a deal.

These, of course, are the sorts of people who fancy themselves “the adults in the room,” while people who proceed with prudence, caution, and regard for the rule of law are to be regarded as traitors, cowards, or Russian agents.

Consider, for example, Sean Hannity’s [March 2 suggestion](#) that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—which *really* means the United States—should attack a Russian tank column with “some of [NATO’s] fighter jets, or maybe they can use some drone strikes and take out the whole damn convoy.” For Hannity, this would not count as escalation because NATO could elect to not tell the Russians who carried out the attack, and then Moscow “won’t know who to hit back.”

Meanwhile, support for a “no-fly zone” has been one of the more dangerous avenues to escalation, since a no-fly zone would be a de facto declaration of war on Russia. Sen. Roger Wicker, for example, [has said](#) the US should “seriously consider” a no-fly zone. Florida congresswoman Maria Salazar [supports a no-fly zone](#) for the very profound reason that “freedom isn’t free.” (Fortunately, most members of Congress appear to recognize that a no-fly zone would mean World War III.)

And then there are the pundits who have outright treated the gravity of nuclear war with a lot of hand-waving. NBC’s chief foreign correspondent, Richard Engel, in an apparent reference to nuclear war, implied the US should risk everything in order to destroy a Russian convoy.

Sam Bowman, a senior fellow at the Adam Smith Institute, says that nuclear war “[is worth risking](#)” if it means making war on Russia.

Unfortunately, wildly irresponsible calls for escalation are not new, and are part of a long tradition that began during the Cold War. By this way of thinking, nuclear war is indeed “worth it” if it means “victory.”

Today, many of those calling for such things can be found on the center left—such as Engel—or

among self-described “neoliberals” like Bowman. Back during Cold War I, however, the most enthusiastic fans of nuclear war were found in the ranks of Buckleyite conservatives. In either case, the capricious attitude toward nuclear war illustrates the most troubling aspect of the “let the nukes fly” position: those who advocate for “risking it” think they (or some tiny minority of policy makers) ought to decide for the whole human race how many millions will be sacrificed in nuclear flames.

Cold Warriors for Nuclear War

It is now generally ignored that leaders of the conservative movement actively campaigned for initiating a nuclear war. William F. Buckley himself, for example, [proposed that Western civilization be sacrificed](#) in a nuclear war, if necessary, in order to incinerate the Russians.

In *The JFK Conspiracy*, [David Miller noted](#) that many conservatives during the period appeared to have bloodlust:

President Kennedy’s Decision in 1962 to avoid another invasion of Cuba angered virtually every rightist in America....

In a column of November 10, 1962, William F. Buckley, Jr. called for a nuclear war against the Russians, arguing that “if ever a cause was just, this one is, for the enemy combined the ruthlessness and savagery of Genghis Khan with the fiendish efficiency of an IBM machine [Ah yes, that efficient Soviet Union!].... Better the chance of being dead, than the certainty of being Red. And if we die? We die.”

Bill Buckley was far from the only American rightist to call for nuclear war in the early 1960s. William Schlamm, a John Birch Society member who had helped found *National Review* in the 1950s told a Cologne, Germany audience in 1960 that the West should be prepared to sacrifice 700,000,000 people in order to defeat Communism.

Clarence Manion, a conservative radio pundit of the time, [proposed a pile of ten million corpses](#) in the name of “winning” the Cold War:

I am tired of hearing an old man like [Nobel Prize chemist] Linus Pauling cry his fear of death in a nuclear war.... How long does he want to live anyway? If we must fall to Communism, I would rather it be over the remains of 10,000,000 charred bodies of which I would be proud to be one.

Better Dead than Red? Who Gets to Decide That for You?

Indeed, the possible extinction of humanity is no big deal if one truly believes that each person is “better dead than Red.” Ronald Hamowy, however, suggested that perhaps it was a bad idea to allow Buckley—or anyone else—to decide for all whether death is preferable to communism:

Mr. Buckley chooses to be dead rather than Red. So do I. But I insist that all men be allowed to make that decision for themselves. A nuclear holocaust will make it for them.

In support of Hamowy's position, Murray Rothbard [continues](#):

Anyone who wishes is entitled to make the personal decision of "better dead than Red" or "give me liberty or give me death." What he is not entitled to do is to make these decisions for others, as the prowar policy of conservatism would do. What conservatives are really saying is: "Better them dead than Red," and "give me liberty or give them death"—which are the battle cries not of noble heroes but of mass murderers.

Ultimately, the conservative movement began to pretend these opinions had never been expressed at all. As Rothbard [explained](#):

The true guiding message of the Conservative Movement was enunciated clearly in a public anti-Communist rally years ago by the candid and fiery L. Brent Bozell: "To stamp out world Communism I would be willing to destroy the entire universe, even to the furthest star." It doesn't take a radical libertarian not to want to go the whole route, to dance the full dance, with Brent Bozell and the Conservative Movement, the theme of which is not "better dead than Red" but "better you—and you—and you dead than Red."

Of course, today's advocates for de facto nuclear war are more coy about it than the Buckylys and Manions of the past. They don't come right out and say, "I'd rather incinerate half the world than live in a world where Russians conquered Mariupol!" They call for benign-sounding forms of escalation like "no-fly zones" or just "bombing a convoy." Or the cryptic "Maybe we should risk everything." Perhaps that's progress from the bad old days of 1962. People who actually take nuclear war seriously, however, know that history has shown mobilizations and escalations have a long history of getting out of hand and leading to very bad things far beyond what many political leaders imagined was possible. As much as the proescalation crowd pretends otherwise, the fact is that not every problem in the world can be solved with military action.

by Ryan McMaken

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