

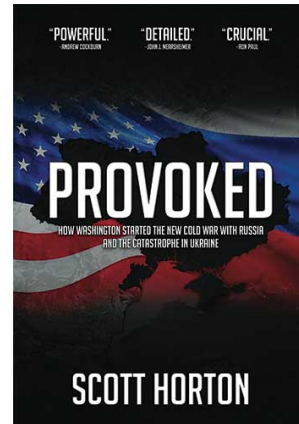


Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on January 21, 2025

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Foreign-policy Failure

Scott Horton's new book *Provoked: How Washington Started the New Cold War With Russia and the Catastrophe in Ukraine* offers a compelling critique of U.S. foreign policy and its role in the events leading up to the current war between Russia and Ukraine. The book challenges the dominant narrative promoted by Western media and the political Establishment, which has labeled Russia's 2022 invasion as an "unprovoked attack" on a peaceful, democratic nation. Horton argues that this depiction is misleading, and he traces a series of U.S. actions that contributed to the escalation.



Although he believes that Russia had alternatives to war in defending its interests, Horton argues that the United States bears significant responsibility for creating the conditions that led to the conflict. He begins by examining Washington's post-Cold War policies, driven by neoconservative ambitions to maintain and expand American global hegemony. Instead of "going home" and embracing a vision of the United States as a "limited republic," policymakers pursued an imperial agenda. A central pillar of this strategy was NATO's eastward expansion, a process that Russia repeatedly warned would be seen as a direct threat to its security.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its thorough documentation of U.S. policy decisions, showing how every administration from George H.W. Bush to Joe Biden contributed to this expansionist strategy. Horton illustrates how George H.W. Bush's promise to Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand "one inch eastward" was quickly abandoned. Under Bill Clinton, NATO's membership grew to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, setting a precedent for further eastward expansion. George W. Bush's administration took it further, supporting NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine — moves that Russia's leadership viewed as openly hostile. Barack Obama's support for "color revolutions" and his administration's role in the 2014 Maidan uprising in Ukraine further exacerbated tensions. Horton highlights how this effort facilitated the rehabilitation of Ukrainian ultranationalism, with militant groups such as the Azov Battalion rising to prominence, adding a dangerous new dimension to the crisis.

The chapter on Donald Trump's presidency is one of the most revealing in the book. Despite Trump's rhetoric about improving relations with Russia, Horton shows that his administration's actions often did the opposite. For instance, Trump's approval of arms sales to Ukraine — something even Obama had refrained from doing — marked a significant escalation. At the same time, the U.S. ramped up military training for Ukraine's armed forces and deepened intelligence cooperation. Trump also withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which banned ground-launched short- and medium-range ballistic and cruise missiles, and the Open Skies Treaty, which allowed mutual unarmed aerial surveillance among signatory countries. Moreover, he indicated that he would have allowed the New



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START nuclear-arms reduction treaty to expire in 2021 had he been reelected in 2020. “Trump was either a Russia hawk with the worst of them or he had no control over the Pentagon’s world empire and its policies on such matters,” writes Horton.

Last but not least, Horton notes that Trump, depicted as a “real internationalist” by his national security advisor, Robert O’Brien, never halted a “single” NATO deployment, but instead bolstered the alliance by pressuring members to raise defense spending.

This chapter illustrates a central theme of Horton’s work: Even when a U.S. president attempts to shift course, entrenched interests and institutional inertia often preserve the status quo. Driven by “the blob” — a bipartisan network of policymakers, think tanks, defense contractors, and career diplomats — interventionist policies have endured across multiple administrations. Notably, while Horton is critical of most of the already-announced picks for key national security and foreign-policy positions under the second Trump administration, he holds out a glimmer of hope. He suggests that Trump’s “resentment” toward his “establishment enemies” and his “personal negotiation style,” which proved pivotal in restoring relations with North Korea, could offer a path toward a more independent and less interventionist foreign policy.

Finally, Horton delivers a scathing critique of the Biden administration, arguing that its strong support for Ukraine — including substantial military aid, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic backing — emboldened Kyiv to reject potential compromises with Moscow. By framing Ukraine’s resistance as a heroic stand for democracy, the United States escalated the conflict, pushing it toward the brink of nuclear confrontation.



Scott Horton (Stubb05/Creative Commons)

Horton’s book also highlights the broader ideological underpinnings of U.S. foreign policy. He argues that neoconservatives have driven much of this agenda, fueled by a belief in American exceptionalism.



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The pursuit of “full-spectrum dominance” has led to perpetual wars, from Iraq and Afghanistan to Libya and Syria, with Ukraine being the latest flashpoint. Horton’s critique of this ideology is sharp, and he contends that it runs contrary to the vision of the Founding Fathers, who sought a foreign policy based on “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations.”

While the book focuses on U.S. culpability, Horton does not absolve Russia of blame. He stresses in interviews, “The book is not called *Justified*, it’s called *Provoked*.” He argues that other options were available to Russia besides war, and recognizes the suffering and destruction caused by the invasion. Further, he maintains that the war’s political and military consequences have been a disastrous “Pyrrhic Victory” for Moscow: Ukraine’s military capacity has grown with Western aid, its population’s hostility toward Russia has solidified, and NATO’s resolve to expand its influence has only strengthened.

Critics have accused Horton of being overly sympathetic to Russia’s perspective or downplaying Ukraine’s agency. However, the careful reader will see that Horton’s aim is to reveal the broader context that made the current war more likely. His work challenges readers to see the conflict as part of a longer chain of cause-and-effect relationships rather than an isolated event. Most importantly, Horton’s analysis remains firmly rooted in U.S. interests. “I am a Texan, and I am a patriot, and I don’t care at all about Russia or its interests. This book is about what’s good for the United States of America,” he told Ron Paul and Daniel McAdams in a December interview on *The Ron Paul Liberty Report*.

Provoked: How Washington Started the New Cold War With Russia and the Catastrophe in Ukraine is an essential read for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the ongoing war. By exposing the policies that led to the conflict, Horton sheds light on the broader consequences of American empire building. His work serves as a stark reminder of how foreign-policy decisions, often made behind closed doors, can have catastrophic effects on the world stage. For those weary of simplistic “good vs. evil” narratives, Horton’s book offers a sobering, well-documented alternative perspective.

It is worth noting that Horton’s viewpoints were influenced by his collaboration with the late William Norman Grigg, a former senior editor of *The New American* magazine. Together, they co-founded The Libertarian Institute, a platform dedicated to challenging interventionist foreign policy and exposing government overreach. Grigg, known for his principled stance against state power and his eloquent defense of civil liberties, left a lasting imprint on Horton’s approach to critiquing U.S. foreign policy and the entrenched interests driving it.



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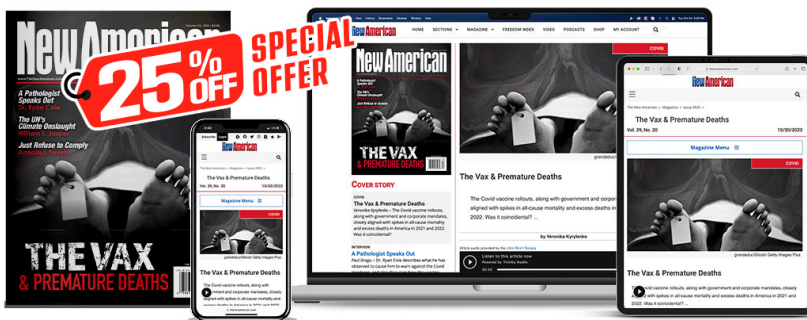
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