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## How Bill Clinton Sealed Ukraine's Fate

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By George E. Bogden

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**Presidents Clinton, Boris Yeltsin and Leonid Kravchuk sign the agreement on disarming Ukraine in Moscow, Jan. 14, 1994.**

Photo: Getty Images

Immediately after Ukraine signed its final agreement to renounce nuclear weapons in 1994, the country's first president, Leonid Kravchuk, grimly remarked: "If tomorrow Russia goes into Crimea, no one will raise an eyebrow." As we now know, that isn't all Moscow would attempt to reclaim. Recently released archival documents demonstrate how American officials, adamant about the country's denuclearization, ignored the sentiments of Ukraine's postcommunist leaders, who were desperate to secure their new country.

Vladimir Putin's carnage in Ukraine and threats of nuclear escalation cast a haunting shadow over the Budapest Memorandum, the accord that occasioned Mr. Kravchuk's remorse. By its terms, Ukraine forfeited an inherited Soviet nuclear arsenal in exchange for Western pledges

of aid and “assurances” from Russia, the U.S. and the U.K. that its borders would remain intact. Disarmament experts hailed the pact, but it invited Mr. Putin’s revanchism.

I have spent the past two years reviewing previously sequestered tranches of documents (some released in the past six months) provided by presidential libraries, the United Nations, the National Security Archive and the British National Archives. They pull back the curtain at a critical moment, revealing how the Clinton administration ignored flashing warning signs as it pushed Ukraine hard to accept unilateral disarmament—depriving Kyiv of a deterrent against Russia while providing nothing real to replace it.

The U.S.-led campaign to denuclearize Ukraine began in 1992. Having strained under the yoke of foreign powers for centuries, Kyiv jealously guarded its nascent independence. Many Russians viewed their neighbor’s sovereignty as anomalous, and Ukraine’s postcommunist leadership feared what they might do about it. Mr. Kravchuk had been born in 1934 under one foreign government, Poland; saw his father die fighting a second, Germany; and lived decades under communist rule. He was determined not to see his nation subjugated again. The inherited Soviet arsenal represented a potent check against future Russian aggression.

Kravchuk’s government therefore harbored apprehensions about abandoning it. He considered trading this ace for an ironclad territorial guarantee, something akin to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s Article 5 umbrella. But Secretary of State James Baker balked. He believed this would result in identical demands from all post-Soviet states. When Ukraine subsequently resisted committing to disarmament through the 1992 Lisbon Protocol, Mr. Baker put this defiance to an end with a blistering phone call. “I have never heard one man speak to another in quite that way,” Jim Timbie, an aide who was with Mr. Baker at the time, said in describing the secretary’s side of the conversation to Ambassador Thomas Graham Jr. Mr. Baker required that the signing ceremony the next day adjourn without speeches from the parties.

Following U.S. elections that November, Mr. Kravchuk gained an untested negotiating partner but not new leverage. Bill Clinton’s administration proved even less amenable to his concerns. As archival documents show, a new cadre of officials approached the issue with a heightened sense of certainty—and urgency. “Ukraine could not keep nuclear weapons,” Steven Pifer, a State Department official who later served as ambassador to Ukraine (1998-2000), recalled in 2018. “No one in the U.S. government questioned” this objective. A sign in the Office of New Independent States fashioned a Clintonian mantra to match the prevailing view: “It’s the nukes, stupid.”

The full-court press began on the president’s sixth day in office. Teleconference transcripts reveal Mr. Clinton neither waited for the full-scale review of disarmament policy the General Accounting Office recommended in 1993 nor for Ambassador Strobe Talbott’s comprehensive appraisal of existing policies toward post-Soviet states before dialing up the

pressure on Kyiv. On his first call with Mr. Kravchuk in office, on Jan. 26, 1993, Mr. Clinton offered \$175 million—which grew to \$700 million by 1994—in exchange for dismantlement of Ukraine’s nuclear arsenal. He also proposed “strong security assurances” from the U.S. to assuage Mr. Kravchuk’s security fears.

A wily former apparatchik, Mr. Kravchuk bet that if he stayed at the table, his country wouldn’t end up on the menu. He relayed his concerns in stark terms. “The fear,” he explained to Mr. Clinton, “is political explosion and the dividing up of Ukraine—autonomy for Donetsk, and Krivoi Rog, and Galicia, and finally the dismemberment of the country.” These warnings, prescient as they seem now, didn’t move Mr. Clinton or his team. National security adviser Anthony Lake, writing to the president in 1993, complained that promised future cooperation had failed “to spur the Ukrainians to see their security as enhanced by eliminating nuclear weapons.” Kyiv didn’t understand its true “long-term interest,” Mr. Lake insisted; only he and his colleagues did.

Top members of the National Security Council acknowledged Ukraine’s anxieties in a regional policy review published in 1994. “Russian territorial ambitions against Ukraine could result from a failure of reform in Russia itself,” they passively observed. “Disputes between Russia and Ukraine, left unattended, will threaten the stability and unity of Europe.” Yet having acknowledged the possibility of what has now become historical fact, the authors threw up their hands—or washed them clean. “At best,” they concluded “we can actively work to encourage Ukraine and Russia to resolve their differences.”

Yet Russian leaders had long telegraphed that they weren’t much interested. Defense Minister Pavel Grachev insisted that Ukraine’s nuclear weapons be given to its former masters in Moscow. His opposition to international control or U.S. monitoring was unyielding. When Mr. Talbott and Defense Secretary Les Aspin chided his “counterproductive” stance at a 1993 meeting in Garmisch, Germany, Grachev retorted that a nuclear-armed Russia was in “no way an adversary to Ukraine.”

Exerting a heavy hand in the trilateral negotiation that preceded the Budapest Memorandum, the U.S. ultimately required little of Russia. Moscow merely reiterated commitments it had already made under the U.N. Charter and the Helsinki Final Act in return for full-scale disarmament of all former satellites. American policy makers never circled back to shore up Ukrainian strength after President Boris Yeltsin declared Russia’s “blood relation” to its former dominions at the U.N. General Assembly, or when he announced a “cold peace” at the same conference where the Budapest Memorandum took effect.

U.S. officials avoided ruffling Russian feathers while recognizing Moscow’s duplicity and doubts about its own disarmament. Weeks before the memorandum was signed, Mr. Talbott reported warnings to Mr. Lake from Russia’s deputy foreign affairs minister: “Advisers and

political manipulators, whom [Georgiy] Mamedov calls 'lagos,' have been whispering in Yeltsin's ear."

Mr. Mamedov claimed they were poisonously alleging there were " 'forces' in the U.S., including in the Administration, that want to 'contain' Russia." In the same document, released this past October, Mr. Talbott noted that "we're keeping our powder dry for another arms race if necessary." Amid the urgent effort to denude Ukraine of weapons, he admitted "we don't believe [Moscow is] reducing their strategic [nuclear] forces fast enough."

The smoldering rubble in Ukraine may not be prima facie evidence that its post-Soviet government should have insisted on nuclear warheads as its birthright. But it does beckon something more than contrived historical resignation. In his 2018 tract on Ukrainian-American relations, Mr. Pifer ended the chapter on disarmament with a sentence that reads like a stale afterthought: The Clinton administration, he wrote, "could have provided greater military assistance, including some lethal military equipment, to strengthen Ukraine's ability to defend itself and deter further Russian aggression."

The legacy of the Budapest Memorandum doesn't lie in crude conclusions about the desirability of disarmament itself. That straw man obscures insights provided by the vibrant historical record now emerging. Rather, comments like Mr. Pifer's raise a more pressing question: If Ukraine's nuclear weapons "had to go," what means should Kyiv have been provided to halt the historic cycle of domination from Moscow? The flaw of the Budapest Memorandum from its inception—reflected in Ukraine's immiseration today—is that this question appears to have gone unanswered, if it was seriously considered at all.

Altogether, the archival record paints a picture of a new administration charting what it believed was a benevolent path. Its peerless strength, afforded by Soviet disintegration, produced an undisciplined fixation on disarmament. The first Democrats to govern since Jimmy Carter failed to reckon with the wisdom of the party's most celebrated strategist, Zbigniew Brzezinski. "Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire," he said. "But with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire."

Perhaps the administration would have done well to heed the back-channeled common sense conveyed by Mr. Mamedov in 1994. "Many on our side will resent your meddling in something that they believe is none of your business," he said. "Kyiv will resent your taking away the strongest card in their hand." Instead, they chose to invent an Esperanto of disarmament, democracy and free markets.

Perhaps they believed these words alone might lead to their adoption from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Nearly 30 years on, it's clear that they didn't. It's hard to accept that the approach that gave us the memorandum can truly provide a defensible framework for U.S. policy making in the future—certainly not with the road to Kyiv as fraught with Russian aggression as in decades before.

*Mr. Bogden is a fellow at the Smith Richardson Foundation and at the German Marshall Fund of the U.S., a law clerk at the U.S. Court of International Trade and a senior visiting researcher at Bard College.*

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