

The "Vietnam Moment" Is Near: Empire Exhausts Itself | Prof. David Gibbs

After 4.5 years of Proxy-War something is breaking: When the cracks in the pro-war narrative get so large that even Neocons have to admit the empire is running out of munition, an inflection point has been reached. And we have seen this before. What David Gibbs calls the "Vietnam Moment" is not far away anymore. In this talk, professor David Gibbs of the University of Arizona discusses his trip to the Baltics, arguing that anti-Russian feeling is widespread and that Russian-speaking minorities face exclusion. He and Pascal Lottaz compare Western messaging on Ukraine with Vietnam, debate the political costs of a setback, and discuss how culture-war language can be used to support military intervention. Links: David N. Gibbs: <https://dgibbs.arizona.edu/> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Merch: <https://neutralitystudies.com/shop> Donation: <https://neutralitystudies.com/donate> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Baltic Russophobia and Russian minorities 00:08:45 Russophobia, stereotypes and racism 00:14:15 Ukraine and a second Vietnam moment 00:26:28 EU elites, war narratives and crisis 00:32:03 Can a new anti-war coalition emerge? 00:42:51 What if Russia does not break? 00:49:00 Accountability, defeat and escalation 00:59:41 Where to find David Gibbs

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, again, with the always brilliant Professor David Gibbs from the University of Arizona. David, welcome back.

#David Gibbs

Thank you for having me, Pascal.

#Pascal

Thank you for coming back online, and that we can discuss first one of your recent experiences, because you visited the Baltics and you have something to talk about with Russophobia. Then, in the later part, we are going to go into what you're calling maybe a second Vietnam moment. But let's start with Russophobia. What did you actually experience in the Baltics?

#David Gibbs

I spent a month in the three Baltic republics, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, mostly in Latvia, but with briefer excursions to the other two. And superficially, they're very charming. As an American coming from the United States, I'm always impressed by how Europe is much better organized. It's

much more pleasant. It's charming in a lot of ways. But there's very much a dark side in the Baltics that's always been there. And it's most obviously manifested in a kind of aggressive tone of nationalism. There are flags absolutely everywhere, national flags, almost always combined with Ukrainian flags. And anti-Russian statements are, again, just about everywhere.

In Lithuania, for example, in the city council chambers, a giant building, there was a big anti-Russian statement. It was something about denouncing Putin in English, for all to see. I went on several tours, and the tour guides were very... I sensed a real open hostility to all things Russian. It wasn't just Putin, but I think all things Russian. And this is reflected very much also in the recent history of the country. Latvia essentially came pretty close to banning the Russian language. It was an optional secondary school language, and I think they pretty much banned that as of this year. It's very interesting because in Latvia, I think about 25% of the population are ethnic Russians, and it never made Russian a secondary language.

I mean, Canada is about a quarter French-speaking, same proportion. And French has a co-equal status with English. You go to Canada, everything is in English and French. But Russian basically has never been an official language. It was an optional language in secondary school. I think that's been ended. The national radio station used to broadcast in Russian. I think that's been ended, or I think it's about to end. And so there really is a real hostility to Russians, and it extends further than that, in the sense that a sizable number of Russian speakers have been denied citizenship, have never been allowed citizenship. I don't know what the percentage is, but it's high. And in the National Museum, they were open about this.

I went to the National Museum, and they talked about how they have separate identity cards. A certain percentage of the Russian population has non-citizen identity cards, basically because they're stateless. It reminds me a little bit of the interwar period when you had the Nansen passports for stateless persons, displaced persons. And for what it's worth, my father is a refugee from Germany. He had a Nansen passport. It reminds me a little bit of that. And it also, I mean, since I'm making historical parallels here, from the United States, it reminded me a little bit of Europe's Alabama and Mississippi, perhaps, in the old days, including the attitudes, the real hostile attitudes to a large number of people who live in the Baltic region, ethnic Russians.

Lithuania, by the way, I don't think has a significant Russian or large Russian minority. Estonia does, and I believe that there are similar problems in Estonia as well. So, you know, one more point that's worth noting: these are members of the EU and NATO. And I'm really—it's impressive that the EU and NATO, which use very self-righteous, moralistic language, don't seem to be very bothered by any of this. As a matter of fact, of course, as everyone knows, an Estonian is now effectively the foreign minister of the EU, Kaja Kallas. Wow. And she's visibly anti-Russian, not just anti-Putin, but anti-Russian. Anyway, do you want to ask me any questions about this?

#Pascal

Yeah, I mean, isn't that part of this entire horrible process, that we have a European Union that pretends to stand for liberalism and multiculturalism, and here it goes, and everything can be integrated, but since 2014, it is accepted that Ukraine shells other parts of Ukraine and kills massive numbers of Ukrainians who just happen to speak another language, and that all of these anti-Russian, basically, programs are being institutionalized. And as long as it's anti-Russian, it's by definition something positive, because that's where it's this hypocrisy that has been bothering so many of us for years. And you're confirming again that it's still all ever-present.

#David Gibbs

Well, what was interesting to me is there was an image, I guess, of the Russians. At least this is the objective thing. But the impression I get is there's a view of the Russians as kind of diabolical, a threat to national security. Well, it's all over Europe and the United States. I remember, if anything goes wrong in the United States, it must be the Russians. You know, Donald Trump got elected. Russia must have done it. For years, we were obsessed with that. And in Europe, Brexit, it was... It must have been the Russians who did it. Anything that happens, it's the Russians.

Something breaks down, there must have been Russian sabotage. It reminds me a little bit, again, of historical parallels. It seemed almost a little bit like, frankly, a revival in different guise of kind of the old-fashioned kind of anti-Semitism. I'm not talking about the fake kind the Israel lobby harps on constantly, which is largely fictional, but I'm talking about the kind that existed in the '30s. Now, we're talking about Nazi Germany. I'm talking about all over Europe and the United States, about the Jews. I'm sorry, go ahead, go ahead.

#Pascal

Sorry, I just want to say I'll send you an essay that is being written as we speak right now by Jakob Rapkin, who writes exactly that, 9,000 words about, you know, the parallels between Russophobia and anti-Semitism, and actually both coming from exactly the same place, politically speaking. Yeah.

#David Gibbs

Yeah, well, good. I'm glad other people are seeing this. That's exactly how it looked to me. It's interesting because anti-Semitism, again, forget about what Yusra El-Labi says, anti-Semitism in Europe and the United States is officially despised. It's forbidden. In a lot of European countries, it's literally illegal. And it's interesting in places like Latvia, because Latvia had the Latvian Legion, which was a division of the SS, and a lot of Latvians joined. And, you know, it's so much so that I think the Latvian Legion had a memorial day sometime in March that was briefly, for a couple of years, an official holiday in Latvia.

They were required to drop that as an official holiday, I think, when they joined the EU. But it's now an unofficial holiday, widely celebrated. And so, one does get an impression that, as in many places

in Eastern Europe, there was a certain popular support for Nazism during World War II. The collaboration wasn't like in Norway. You had Quisling. He was a political nobody and had no popular support, a pure puppet. That wasn't true everywhere in Europe. And I don't get the impression it was true in Latvia. And, you know, I suspect there was a very deep history of anti-Semitism in Latvia and the Baltic region generally.

But now, essentially, it's forbidden. And again, its substitute is Russians, who are treated and talked about almost exactly the same way. And that's permitted. That's considered politically acceptable bigotry. And, you know, it's hard to discuss these things. I don't want to sound moralistic because I really don't like a moralistic tone. I'm just trying to be as factual as possible. You know, you can make whatever judgment you want on this, but that's what I'm seeing with my own eyes, and that's what it looks like to me.

#Pascal

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#David Gibbs

See you there.

#Pascal

I was in Russia two months ago and at a conference about Russophobia. And one of the outcomes we had there is that, you know, the standard Russophobic stereotype actually fulfills two very opposite purposes. On the one hand, it must depict the Russians as diabolical and highly dangerous people that will kill you, maybe kill you at any instant. On the other hand, it also must ridicule them. It must make them look silly.

#David Gibbs

That's true.

#Pascal

At the same time. And they must be both at the same time, which would be mutually exclusive, but it's not. Is that also what your experience was a bit like, how they're being represented in the Baltics?

#David Gibbs

You know, again, this is just an impression, but, again, I think they were—that is the impression I got—that they're somehow, on the one hand, sort of cunning and clever and intelligent, but in the most evil way. On the other hand, they're slovenly and primitive and backward. One doesn't like to use—I think, again, in Europe, you have this peculiar thing, especially in Eastern Europe, of where does Europe end and where does Asia begin? Yeah. And we here in our village, this is Europe, but over there across the river, that's Asia. And Asia, of course, is bad. It's a bad thing. Geographically, it makes no sense. Eurasia is an integrated continent. But leave that aside. Reality isn't the issue here.

I think this is part of the idea here, is that the Russians are somehow ridiculous as well as clever. So it's a contradictory viewpoint, a little bit. In 2016, Hillary Clinton famously referred to most Trump voters as a basket of deplorables. She probably lost the election for that reason alone, I think. Didn't go over very well with a lot of people. And I think Russia is regarded as Europe's basket of deplorables. They're the trash, forgive the phrase, the white trash of Europe. They're seen in racialized terms, almost as a different race, even if they're white, or most of them are white, not all of them. You know, these are stereotypes. These are kind of really unpleasant stereotypes, but I think this is how they're perceived. I don't know. Do you want to comment on that?

#Pascal

The racism of it. I mean, that's also where Yakov Rapkin's essay then goes down to. I mean, anti-Semitism and Russophobia, they're both versions of racism. It doesn't need to describe the color of your skin. They're actually phenomenally good at being racist against people of all types, right? And then create these silly stereotypes. But it always boils down to dehumanize and basically outcast, and also describe as somebody who needs to be taught. We need to go out and carry white man's burden to civilize these barbarians. That's basically this empire and colonial justifying expansionary element that then allows them to go anywhere and set up shop. If somebody resists, it's just more proof that they need harder education.

#David Gibbs

Well, I think that you are getting at a remarkable thing in Europe, is the extent to which hate speech is violently objected to in Europe. Europe doesn't like hate speech, except for the Russians, except for the Russians, in which case it's laudable. Not only laudable, you must do it. It's almost required. And again, the Baltics, I see, is an extreme version of what's more generalized in Europe. And of course, the response to this is, well, the Russians have badly treated the Baltics. Look how they were treated in the Soviet Union. They were forcibly annexed. That's sort of true, except for one thing. The person who was most responsible for this wasn't Russian.

He was Georgian. His name was Joseph Stalin. They forget that little detail. But, you know, again, reality is another matter. And also there's the issue of collective punishment. There's a collective punishment of all the Russians, including those ethnic Russians who live in Latvia, who live in the

Baltic region. And it seems the European Union is not actually actively endorsing it. It's coming pretty close to endorsing it. Certainly, they're turning a blind eye to it. It doesn't reflect very well on the human rights standards in the European Union, I would say. Certainly, it's very self-contradictory given the kind of rhetorical style they like to employ.

#Pascal

No, no. But then again, we're at a point where Kaja Kallas, the foreign—quote unquote—foreign minister of the EU, will go to Armenia and shake hands with somebody who just basically incarcerated the church leadership and all of the political leadership there, and laud him as a good example of a democrat, and at the same time berate the Georgians for not being European enough. It's a very weird moment, actually, and rhetoric seems to lose—or words, speech acts, seem to lose—most of their original meaning. But that's just the time we're going through. Maybe this is the point to shift the gear, though, a little bit, to this thing that you're calling the Vietnam moment, because reality has this strange attitude of asserting itself every once in a while. And did you feel that, that there's now a bizarre kind of thing where, in reality, things are happening that become unignorable at some point? Yeah.

#David Gibbs

Well, you know, let me just say at the outset that there are two narratives going on. This is a phrase I just heard from John Mearsheimer. And one narrative is that Russia is losing the war, and just, you know, look at the country's falling apart, the economy's falling apart, Putin's losing support. There's just an article in The Economist about Putin losing support. And the other narrative is the opposite: Russia's winning. And one of the problems one has is information. It's very hard to get good information on this. You know, I'm not able to travel to the battlefield and do a proper analysis. And so, how do you get information? There are facts you can check. And one fact that's very interesting is military spending. I went to the SIPRI Institute in Stockholm. They have data on this. How big a part of the Russian economy is going to military? And the answer is military spending is 6.3% of GDP. I just looked it up. That's not very high for a country at war.

#Pascal

But it's also, and that's what the other side usually quotes, it's also more than 40% of the household budget. Of the what budget? Households—the entire household, the entire... So not GDP, but the entire spending, like...

#David Gibbs

Well, that is true, but you have to compare it to other countries. If you compare it, let us say, the United States during World War II, I think it was well over 40% of GDP we were spending. Nazi Germany was well over 50%. Even during Vietnam and Korea, I think it was spending more than

Russia's spending now. So by historical standards, this is not a lot. It indicates to me Russia could ramp this up if they want to. It indicates to me they're not really suffering that much economically. That's pretty clear. Also, one more thing, which is important, is the notion that Europe or even the Baltics have to worry about a Russian invasion is a complete fairy tale.

Because if they were going to get ready to invade other countries, they would be spending a lot more than 6.3% of their GDP. You know, the comparison one has to make here, and this is the comparison everybody makes, is Germany in the buildup to World War II. When Germany was building up to invade Poland and invade everywhere else, I think at the very outset of World War II, it was like a quarter of their GDP went to military. It went up from there. That's what you would be seeing if Russia were really planning a generalized invasion. There's nothing like that.

Nothing like that is happening. So these are checkable facts. And another checkable fact is the popularity of Putin. That's checkable. There's something called the Levada Center, which is regarded as independent and reliable as a polling agency. The Economist just quoted it, and it's very interesting. They quoted it to show that Putin is losing popularity. They didn't give the numbers, but Putin is losing popularity. So I went to the Levada Center's website. He is losing popularity. Last year's popularity rating was at 87%, and now it's dropped to a low of 74%. 74%. What can I say?

#Pascal

He's almost out, right? 74%, he must be.

#David Gibbs

Yeah, it's a disaster. I mean, Merz is much better than that. I mean, Starmer, before he left, he was way more popular than that. And so, I mean, any European leader is much better than that.

#Pascal

The height of his popularity was about 250%, right? Yeah.

#David Gibbs

Must be, must be. But anyway, I wrote a letter to The Economist pointing out that they should have mentioned the numbers here, but I doubt they'll print it. But in any case, so basically what you have here, I think Russia can sustain this war, and they are winning on the battlefield. I mean, they've just had a series of—a string of victories, and it's going very slowly. But my guess is that—my understanding is that you are slowly getting a breakdown of Ukraine's ability to recruit soldiers for the front. They are having a very severe deficit.

They've run out of anti-aircraft missiles. They've become a landlocked country, with Odessa being closed down, basically. I do think it's only a matter of time before they crack and you start seeing

dramatic advances on the battlefield. I'm not a military expert. You might ask someone like Douglas Macgregor that question, but I suspect that time is coming. And the problem is the narrative in the West is that just, "We're winning, we're winning, we're winning." And we've been hearing that for four years. I'm sorry, you wanted to say something, Pascal?

#Pascal

Yeah, I mean, but what happens then? I mean, you know, this is, in a sense, also a usual development of war and war mentality, right? Both sides who fight a war must obviously foster the belief that they're winning, because otherwise, if you didn't, the most natural thing would be to give up and surrender already. We see that in Germany during the Second World War. The Germans were pretending that everything was going fine until it wasn't. In Japan, they were pretending it was going fine until the firebombing started and the reality started setting in, in Vietnam.

And I think that's the parallel that you will draw, because you remember that as well. It's like, was it a victory narrative until defeat started happening? So what happens then when reality breaks through? And that's the one thing, for as horrible as wars are, that's the one aspect that, you know, it creates a form of clarity because at some point it becomes unignorable that you are losing more men than the other one and that the Russians are at the front door. That becomes unignorable. So what does this do?

#David Gibbs

Well, in Vietnam, the way it went was that, you know, the U.S. had been involved, of course, since—actually since early in the '50s, but the real big escalation came in early 1965. That's when the U.S. began putting in hundreds of thousands of ground forces. And the claim was that we're winning, we're winning, we're winning, we're winning. The press just repeated that for the most part. And this is coming out of the McCarthy era, so people were very careful criticizing the official policy, when on the ground it was very clear the U.S. was losing. Intelligence reports had been showing this all along. Robert McNamara was the defense secretary, and he would go around saying that things are going just great in Vietnam.

Whereas in private, basically, he was expressing great frustration. Things were going very badly. U. S. forces were not doing that well against the Viet Cong. Daniel Ellsberg, the famous leaker of the Pentagon Papers, he was an aide to McNamara, and he said one of the things that turned him around and caused him to leak the Pentagon Papers is that, you know, in private, you know, Ellsberg was giving these intelligence reports. Ellsberg was a former Marine, and he would go—he would put on fatigues and a helmet and go out with ARVN patrols in Vietnam to see on the ground what was happening, and his reports were devastating. He said, "Viet Cong are much better organized than we want to accept. They are winning."

And our strategy is not working. And McNamara was reading these reports and expressing great frustration about the future. And then after he read the reports, he would get off the plane and say how great things are going. He would lie through his teeth, is what he would do. And that went on for several years. And people believed it for several years until, in 1968, the Viet Cong launched the Tet Offensive, and they made massive gains. Let me say that militarily, well, for a while, they did quite well. They took over the U.S. Embassy in Saigon for 24 hours. That's incredible, but they did. I mean, they were that effective. And they went far more... They were far more effective than the American media thought was possible.

They couldn't believe it. In retrospect, we know that this was a gamble by the Viet Cong because they knew they would eventually be defeated because the U.S. had air power and firepower that would defeat them. And they suffered great losses. It was a political gesture to undermine American public support for the war. The United States is a democracy, at least a limited one. People do vote. And, you know, people in the United States are nationalistic. They like to support their president in war. And they like to believe what the president and the secretary of defense say. And the whole purpose of the Tet Offensive was to disabuse the American public of that image.

And it worked. That was when public support cracked, because government officials simply could not justify the previous statements that, you know, the Viet Cong basically are losing, the Viet Cong are idiots, they don't know what they're doing. It was this thing called the body count, this grim detail where government officials would make up the number of dead Viet Cong. They made the numbers up. It's a ghoulish detail, but it was a metric of success. And we're seeing that now, by the way. The New York Times was recounting how many dead Russians there were. Nobody can check these figures. So, you know, where they're coming from, who knows?

But you're getting the same thing as you got in Vietnam, which is you got this idea that we're winning, we're winning, we're winning. And any kind of news that might contradict that is being virtually prohibited. I mean, there's lots of oppression going on. Your own show, for example, was briefly taken off the air for 24 hours. You know, people like Jacques Baud, the Swiss colonel who's going on many podcasts, including yours, basically has been harassed in many different ways. George Galloway in Great Britain, you know, there's a suppression, an intimidation of critics of the war that's really quite remarkable. And as a result, the public's not getting the full picture at all.

At some point, the reversals on the battlefield become so dramatic, it'll be very hard to support that. And you're going to get what you had in Vietnam, which is a breakdown of public support for the war, a generalized breakdown of confidence in institutions. In the United States, it was quite dramatic. I mean, you had the Vietnam Syndrome, where there was deep public cynicism about everything the government did in foreign policy. It became very hard for the military to recruit soldiers for many years. People evaded the draft. People were openly ridiculing the military. The CIA had trouble recruiting for years after this.

It weakened public support for all institutions. I think in the EU—United States as well, but especially in the EU—they're extremely frightened of this. I think they're aware they're walking on very thin ice. You have leaders like Starmer. Starmer went out, and he was the seventh British prime minister in ten years, I believe. Or is he the sixth? Britain, I think, is on its seventh prime minister in a decade to rule Britain. Britain is moving to a period of extreme instability. You know, France basically has the presidential system that prevents this. But I believe that Macron is the least popular president in the history of the Fifth Republic. Merz is deeply unpopular.

And so, you know, the European Union in general, the institutions of the European Union have never really gained that much enthusiasm among the European public. And so I think there's an awareness among the EU elite, not just the EU political elite, but I suspect also the private sector elite, that they're walking on very thin ice here. And the only thing that's saving them at this point is the narrative that we're winning, we're going to win, we're going to defeat this Russia. When that narrative is gone, you could have a big political crisis in Europe, and I think that's something that is keeping people up late at night in the sanctums of power in Europe. Do you want to comment on that?

#Pascal

Yeah, it's just like, you know, what I wonder these days is, you're right, I mean, these people, these figures are unpopular, but the systems, you know, the systems that produce them. Yes, the Brits are in crisis because of this turnover, but then again, I mean, we just saw how Mr. Starmer got replaced by somebody who looks precisely like Mr. Starmer, looks like him and even has the same hairstyle. He's like, I mean, you know, you just— and think about it, like, for the United States, for U.S. foreign policy, you had the choice between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris.

It's like, and I cannot believe that Kamala Harris would have an inherently more peaceful approach toward Russia, rather the other way around. I don't think a war with Iran could have been averted with her, but even that is not clear. I mean, maybe it happened earlier. So, in a sense, the system produces those heads that will then implement very similar policy either way. And the question then, to me, is: is the system itself in danger? And I think... That's right. Be in the saddle much, much more strongly, actually. I'm sorry? That seems to be in the saddle.

#David Gibbs

I mean, the system. For the time being, I just wonder how long this will last. In other words, basically, there's great public anxiety about the economic situation. The cutoff of cheap energy from Russia basically is hurting them very badly. Now, of course, the Persian Gulf is hurting them a second time with regards to energy. There's deindustrialization going on in the heart of Europe, in Germany, the industrial center of Germany for many decades. And that's going down. I think, you

know, one of the issues here is why do European elites, why did they want this war with Russia, and why do they want to keep it going? And I think that, you know, it's often so that countries go to war when they see their way of life under threat.

And I think European elites saw their way of life under threat. And what was their way of life? The EU and NATO. That was their way of life. And I think that they had two shocks. And one shock was Donald Trump, at least initially, was seen as anti-NATO. He seems to have contempt for Europe in general. There's no doubt about that. And I think he'd much prefer someone like Kamala Harris or Joseph Biden. I think that's quite clear. I think the election of Donald Trump was a big shock in Europe. That was seen as a threat to NATO. And then, of course, we had Brexit at the same time. And this was a real shock to the European elite. And the question is, how do you explain that to yourself, to each other, the people in the club, shall we say?

And how do you explain it to your population? The answer is there must be a boogeyman. It must be some demon, some devil figure. And who was that demon? Putin and the Russian people. That was their answer. You need a simple answer. It couldn't be you're doing anything wrong. It couldn't be, basically, that neoliberalism, the policies of neoliberalism, basically, that expanded wealth inequality had something to do with it. It couldn't be anything that's wrong with the existing policy. And so we come up with some simple... People like simple explanations, including evidently highly educated people. It's amazing that highly educated people would go for the idea that it was Putin who caused all of these problems.

But I hear this all the time from people with advanced degrees, that the reason Donald Trump was elected was Putin did it. The New York Times was filled with stories about this for years. And, you know, it's, I think that's a big, one of the reasons that you had this rise in Russophobia. I do remember at the time, as Donald Trump, even before he was elected, you had this narrative in the United States that it was all a plot by Russia. And it was amazing how broad—at first I thought nobody would believe this, and then everybody I knew was believing it. I thought, it looks to me like somebody is laying the groundwork for a war with Russia. I remember thinking that at the time. Here we are.

#Pascal

In a sense, I mean, my conclusion that I came to is that the role of liberal media in the U.S. and the West more generally is to constantly provide justification and apologetics for the empire. There was just another one of these articles. There's one in the New York Times right now about why U.S. leaders keep misunderstanding Iran, and basically boils down to the Iran war is a big misunderstanding. It's so difficult to read Iran. If we had better diplomats, if we explained it better, we would have understood, and then the war could have been averted.

It has nothing to do with neoconservatism and the need and the want to dominate, and the plans for an attack for decades, and the connection with Israel. It's a misunderstanding because of its...

you know, the West and the United States is a force for good. Therefore, when something bad happens, it must be a mistake, right? And that's this liberal apologetics for empire. And so, in a sense, I wonder just, again, how much the system then just produces these narratives, of course, that then justify empire, right? But what happens when that ends? And that's, I think, this Vietnam moment. That's the question.

#David Gibbs

What replaces it? I don't have a good answer to that. I mean, one of the things you're seeing that's historically rather interesting to me is an ideological breaking of ideologies in the United States. And since traditionally anti-war has been associated with the political left, in the early part of my life, that was very, very, very clear. The activist left, to the left of the Democratic Party I'm talking about here, were anti-war, anti-intervention. They also talked about the deep state, the CIA, CIA surveillance, this kind of thing. And the right supported those things. That's really broken down completely.

There recently was a meeting at Tucker Carlson's house. He's a famous conservative commentator, a strong supporter of Trump in the past. He's broken with Trump. And, you know, it was a series of formerly pro-Trump Republican conservatives: Marjorie Taylor Greene, the ultra-conservative former congresswoman from Georgia, Thomas Massie, the recently defeated-for-re-election libertarian congressman from Kentucky, and several others. And they all were talking about the need for an anti-war party in America, the need basically for a conservative anti-war party. Now, again, to me, somebody from my generation, that seems interesting.

You might say even bewildering, just because it goes so much against what it used to be. On the left, you have... You know, the left recently had a string of successes. The Democratic Socialists of America has become a major force in the Democratic Party. They recently nominated somebody who's likely to be elected senator from Michigan, El-Sayed, who is a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. He's actually a very talented guy. Zohran Mamdani, the mayor of New York City, a member of the socialist organization. Bernie Sanders helped to legitimate it 10 years ago. And so I think that, you know, you're having this resurgence of the word socialism in America.

And on foreign policy, they clearly are against the Iran war, and they're against U.S. support for Israel. I mean, and take a very strong position on the war in Gaza, particularly the horrific things—indeed, it must be said, genocidal things—Israel has been doing there, right? But in almost every other conflict, they're either silent or even pro-war. On Ukraine, as far as I'm aware, most of these people, El-Sayed specifically, is pro-war, and they endorse the war. They endorse the war against Russia. On Syria, on Afghanistan, on a whole series of other things, they've either been silent, the other left, or they've endorsed these things.

And I think, you know, what you're getting on the left is that what you're placing in a kind of principled anti-war position is a moral self-righteousness, almost as if moral self-righteousness is a

justification in itself. And you've taken a morally self-righteous position that clearly is the right position. You might say it's the moralistic fallacy: if you use moralistic language, that proves your position is moral and that you're a moral person, which does not follow at all. But leave that aside. And I think that the moralistic tone associated with things like the war against Russia in Ukraine, this very much appeals to them.

And also there's something else: the culture wars. Putin has been associated with social conservatism. You know, he doesn't have a gay pride parade in Moscow, for example. He doesn't—let me say, you know, I'm a big fan of gay rights, and I do not like people who demonize gays. I'm not into that at all. But that's a separate issue from, should we go to war with people like that? It seems like a very bad way to help gays is to go to war. And so I think basically the cultural issues—gender, race, and sexuality—have a tremendous grip on the left. So much so, I think foreign policy is framed—it frames foreign policy issues in a very superficial way, I would say.

#Pascal

Yeah, but we must, you know, we must just also acknowledge just how insanely successful and skilled the war apparatus in the United States is, and the West in general, at riding these popular waves, right? We went from a position where 10, 15 years ago in the U.S., you know, the military services, you had a don't ask, don't tell policy, right? The place where now the U.S. military is actively trying to recruit gays, transgender, and so on, and prides itself on being an equal opportunity employer. You know, I've had Chris Mott on this show, and he was talking about, you know, pinkwashing of the military services, like, oh yeah, gays are very welcome. And then, you know, gay bombs are bombs for good, right? We're bombing these people to help them. I mean, this is just ingenious. And this, of course, then captures exactly that clientele, the liberalist left, saying like, oh yeah, well actually, let's bring them gay rights with our pink bombs. I'm sorry.

#David Gibbs

I'm sorry. Do you want to finish? I apologize. I interrupted you.

#Pascal

Sorry, I was just saying that's the idea. Sorry, of course, they don't frame it, phrase it like that. But it's really, it's a huge abuse. And for me as a gay man, it's also a huge insult to the intellect, right, of the gays to say, like, no, you're easy to manipulate, by the way.

#David Gibbs

Yeah, it was a famous CIA recruitment video a few years ago that had a CIA officer who was Hispanic, and she was prancing around talking about how intersectional she is and how intersectional the CIA is. It was a CIA recruiting video. It was kind of hilarious, actually. And, you

know, so the idea that basically, you know, the language of gender, race, and sexuality is somehow radical or anti-system is very superficial and very foolish. But nevertheless, it's been effective. I think it has been a means of selling war and demonizing enemies. I have to say that even on Iran, there are a lot of people on the left—I know people personally who've done this—who basically initially favored the overthrow, or spoke at least somewhat positively about the possibility of overthrowing the Iranian government because they mistreat women and they mistreat gays.

And so, again, this is very superficial and foolish, because look what's happened. Look what came of that. We had a major war that just devastated Iran. Iran will end up winning the war, but at great, enormous cost to the country. And unfortunately, people on the left will have played some role in helping lay the propaganda groundwork for this, whether they like it or not. They had an article—it was a publication associated with the New Left Review, what was called Sidecar, I think. They had an article basically talking about how, you know, the uprising against the government was a purely popular uprising, and it disparaged the idea that this was externally directed. You know, the Israeli press was openly talking about how Mossad was assisting it.

It was clearly being supported externally as part of a regime change operation. And so there's an enormous naivety, I think, in these things. But the implication here is very simple: the old breakdown between left and right—that the left is anti-interventionist, the right is pro-interventionist—that's gone. That's just totally gone. What ideally you would see is adjoining forces of people across ideologies now against war and militarism. That, I think, is something—there's a crying need for that in American politics. And unfortunately, it'd be very difficult to achieve that, again, because of the cultural issues. I think there are people who would find that there are at least some issues, not at all, they might agree with Tucker Carlson.

But they would never vote for him again because he's anti-abortion. I'm pro-abortion. I favor abortion rights. I understand that. But I'm just pointing out that the cultural, social issues are going to make an alliance of that sort very difficult and problematic. It's going to hobble any effort to have a real anti-war party in the United States. Now, I'm not familiar with the situation in Europe, but I'm assuming something like that is happening in Europe as well, that you do have right-wing populist parties, which I would not vote for, just for all sorts of reasons. They're very unappealing to me. But I think to the extent that you're getting anti-war thrust here, it's often coming from parties like the AfD. Am I wrong on that?

#Pascal

No, you're right. But the problem with them is, rather on the other side, these parties tend to be pro-peace with Russia. But when it comes to Israel and the Arab question, the Palestinian question, then they're like, no, of course these white people need to defend themselves. That's true. It's not anti-war in the sense of anti-violence. It's more like which kind of violence. And the current establishment is like, oh, all forms of violence are wonderful as long as we don't like the people that it's being done to. And then the right is a little bit more like, yeah, no, you know, fellow whites, maybe not. But

then you have a chart, kind of like in, you know, Family Guy: like, at this shade of brown, it's okay. Yeah.

#David Gibbs

I think that there have been efforts, I think, to sort of transcend this tribalism by people who, in my view, are principled and intelligent. And I'm thinking of Sarah Wagenknecht in Germany and George Galloway in Great Britain, both of whom I have respect for. Unfortunately, they've not been very successful electorally. I'm sure the establishment is doing everything they can to defeat them. But I think a bigger problem they have is they're in between two stools, right? Basically, you know, you have the mainstream left, which favors crushing Putin, and then you have the right. And they're trying to basically bridge that gap. And too many people are simply—they'll vote for one or the other, but there's not enough room for someone like Wagenknecht to get into the Bundestag, apparently.

#Pascal

No, it's true, although she might have, had they counted the votes correctly. But there's that, there's that. It would still be only a 5, 5.1% support, not like 25, 30 or something. Yeah, it was a disappointment to me. It may just

#Pascal

Because, again, what we see is that we have a relatively large consensus, in one way or another, for belligerence with Russia, for belligerence in West Asia, even if it's not absolute, but there is. But now we are confronted with this new reality that Russia doesn't break. It's just not breaking. Iran is just not breaking. Exactly. Hamas is not going away. So you run into this wall of reality suddenly. And just to come back to the Vietnam metaphor, like, what does it take, though, in the political West, in the United States, to swing around? Because, you know, one of the most fascinating scenes for me of the last couple of years was in 2023, right?

When Joe Biden was in Hanoi and shaking hands, like, you know, very smiling from ear to ear, doing a strategic partnership with—elevating the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship to a strategic partnership—and saying, like, well, this is a big breakthrough. It's great. It's wonderful. And the man he was shaking hands with was actually in the trenches fighting the Americans back in Vietnam. And he didn't—I mean, because Vietnam is, of course, North Vietnam, right? It's the enemy Vietnam. But there is a moment when everything swings into another, into a completely other narrative. Is something like that thinkable? And if yes, then how many decades would it take?

#David Gibbs

That's a good question. I don't know. I mean, I'm very surprised that the U.S. has had this rapprochement with Vietnam. We haven't dealt with Cuba, and so it's a very arbitrary thing. You'd think that we have a bigger grudge against Vietnam than against Cuba, but it's the opposite. There's a certain arbitrariness to these things that I can't quite explain. So I can't tell you why that's the case. I would say, though, with regard to Europe, one of the things you are seeing is indeed that European living standards—there's a trade-off between guns and butter. I mean, that's something I'm working on right now. And the public has always been somewhat reluctant to go to war.

Because I think deep down they understand there is this trade-off and that they will be the victims of a war themselves. And so you need a propaganda campaign and you need information control. And they are doing that in Europe big time. And they're doing it also in the United States, but even more so in Europe, is my impression. The problem is when reality becomes so out of kilter with the propaganda that it sort of smacks you in the face. And I think we're approaching that point in Europe. And then the people would say, "We've lowered our living standards. We've permanently de-industrialized the continent. We've weakened the social fabric of Europe."

We've made it very difficult ever to reconcile with Russia, at least for maybe decades to come. We've blown up the Nord Stream pipeline. We've done all these things, and now we're going to lose the war too. We're not even going to have victory. And you elites promised victory. You told us again and again, we're on the verge of victory, Putin's about to fall, and he's going to win the war. How are they going to explain that? They won't be able to explain that. And I think you could get serious political instability in Europe. Very likely you will get the coming to power of the AfD in Germany, the National Front in France. You will get this.

What they will do and how they will restore order is anybody's guess. I suspect we're in for an extended period of instability in Europe, possibly with street violence. Often, these things, when they're not addressed at the electoral level, people go into the street. That's a real possibility. In the U.S., I think that possibility is even greater because we have a much greater history of violence. We're a much more violent country in the United States. We have a lot of guns here. And so I'm very fearful of an outbreak of violence. You know, Trump talked about initially, when he signed the Memorandum of Understanding, he said he did it because he did not want to go down as Herbert Hoover.

He did not want to cause a Great Depression, meaning that he looked at the facts and realized there was a real possibility of an economic crisis and maybe a Great Depression. That's why he pulled back. But then, of course, he violated the MOU, and we're back at war again, or at least a state of semi-war with Iran. And so, you know, you could get a major economic crisis. Two wars, two major theaters of war are ongoing right now. That's got to be very destabilizing for the world economy. I'm very surprised it's held up as long as it has. And so, if you get an economic downturn associated

with all these things, and then you lose two wars, you could get a very serious bout of instability. Will America get a Roosevelt to restore order in a sort of benign way? I wouldn't put any money on it.

#Pascal

Yeah, the thing is, you know, I don't know many elites in the U.S. who had to suffer personally because of a pro-war stance. Usually, pro-war gets you support, and at worst, you're thrown out of office. But even Nixon, you know, he then just got to retire and whatnot. The talk is that, you know, part of the assassination of JFK was not because he wanted to go to war. It was because he was seriously contemplating a peace with Russia. That's at least one of the strains of the explanation. So it's like pro-war doesn't really cause personal suffering. In Europe, it's different, right? Some pro-war leaders really, I mean, they met a very brutal end, including, of course, Mussolini and Hitler. Then again, others who did this repeatedly, let's say the British, they barely paid a price for that, right? The leaders of it. So the current leadership—and the current leadership views itself as... Yeah, I think that's right.

#David Gibbs

Yeah, it's going to be very difficult to explain this to the public. I think that the public is simply not going to accept an outcome of disaster. We've spent hundreds of billions, and what do we have to show for it? I don't see this going very well politically. And one of the things they're seeing, I have to say, is the quality of leadership in Europe right now is historically some of the worst you've ever seen. You'd have to go back to the '30s and, you know, the kind of people in France who gave France the Maginot Line, the military geniuses who did that. I think that's the level of thinking that we have now in the Élysée Palace and in No. 10 Downing Street. That's what we have, are these people with no imagination who all they can think of, basically, is the only solution they can come up with is a war. I think there was an image that war would somehow draw the countries together. It would solve all our problems. It would, I don't know.

#Pascal

It would break Russia. It would make everything much easier. And then you can even, you know, Ukraine goes to BlackRock and everybody makes a lot of money. I think that...

#David Gibbs

It's making a lot of money. There's also, I think they saw military spending as a pole of economic growth. Europe's economy has become relatively stagnant and lacking in productivity. And so now military spending would restore all of that. That doesn't really work for a lot of reasons. Military spending is a very inefficient way, as it turns out, to promote growth. There are much better ways to do it. And they've had their energy cut off. You need energy, basically, for growth, and they've cut

that off. And there's no good substitute for it. So a moment's reflection: this is not going to work. But I think that there's a certain desperation. I sense a certain desperation here in European elites.

And so I think, again, what they're afraid of, again, is... You mentioned, by the way, the issue of accountability. This is a fascinating thing to me, the issue of lack of accountability. There was one period in America where we did have accountability. That was during Vietnam. Johnson... He didn't leave office. He declined to run for re-election. It was as if he left office. I'm just old enough to barely remember that. And he left basically in disgrace. He'd been wildly popular earlier in his career and left in disgrace. He didn't live that long. He died, I think, five years later, I think, in despair. He was widely discredited by Vietnam. Nixon, as I would see it, Watergate was all about Vietnam.

Nixon left office because of the Watergate scandal, but I think what it really was about, the real scandal, was Vietnam. That was the real scandal, and Watergate was a stand-in. You could say it... Watergate, in a lot of ways, was overrated. It was just, you know, it was an illegal break-in, it was a cover-up, but compare that to the My Lai massacre, you know, compare that to other things that Nixon did, the overthrow of Allende in Chile. It was nothing. And so I think what it reflected was loss of public confidence in elite structures, and the need to find a scapegoat. Nixon was a useful scapegoat because, you know, he was obviously a very cynical actor.

He was very unattractive in lots of ways. And so I think he was—and so he paid a price. He left office in disgrace. Robert McNamara left office in disgrace. Many of these people did pay a price in terms of reputation. What's very striking is that it has not been repeated. The people who brought us the Iraq War, the catastrophic Iraq War, the war on terror, they haven't paid a price at all. Victoria Nuland, of course, was the advisor to Richard Cheney. And she was rewarded. She ascended because of her failure. She then became a top foreign policy advisor to Hillary Clinton, who made her assistant secretary of state under Obama. And she helped bring us the Ukraine war after having brought us the Iraq war.

She didn't suffer at all for her failures. There's nothing like failure in Washington to make you go upwards. So there's no accountability. I mean, accountability is a thing of the past. But I wonder if we're reaching the end of that. I think one of the reasons Donald Trump was elected is the public, I think, had tired of that system on a number of levels. I mean, it was first of all, the war on terror, I think, was a very embittering experience for the American public, including people who supported George Bush initially, many Republicans. I teach in southern Arizona, where there are a lot of military personnel who come to my classes, and I've seen this happen. They were very embittered by the war on terror.

And so I think that's one of the things that did bring Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Ironically, they were flip sides of the same coin. They're both anti-system candidates. Another thing also was the financial blowout of 2008. You know, neoliberal deregulation had brought us this financial blowout, which wiped out people's living standards. And nobody paid a price for that either. There was hardly any prosecution. There was no investigation. There was no accountability whatsoever. So

I think a lack of accountability had become a real theme in American politics. I suspect it's also becoming a theme in European politics as well. Losing the war in Ukraine and Iran will greatly accelerate this process, I suspect.

#Pascal

Yeah, if it will be framed as a loss, right?

#David Gibbs

What scenario? I can't see any scenario in which this can be papered over and covered up, but maybe you have some thoughts on that.

#Pascal

Well, Zelensky going into exile with his whole entourage and then being, you know, from Great Britain, staging, you know, the war of resistance. You can keep it up and running, and then every once in a while a car bomb that goes up and blows up a Russian general or whatnot, and then again, victory, and we just need to hold out. You can draw this out in many different ways for quite a while because it's like, it's at least—at least 50% of this thing is a propaganda war. It's like a make-believe war, right? It's who can win that. And interestingly enough, the only ones so far who were willing to fight the propaganda war on the turf of the West were the Iranians. They chose to do the Lego movies. They chose to say, like, good, okay, we're going to go to Twitter. The Russians gave that up from the beginning. They even said, so, like, we can't win this one, therefore we're not even going to do it.

#David Gibbs

No, that's true. That's true. Iran has been better at it. That's quite true. I agree with that. You know, John Mearsheimer takes some sense of the view you're taking, that basically, you know, Ukraine will continue to be used as a battering ram against Russia as far as the eye can see. I think that Russia will try and make it a dysfunctional rump state, which they're doing, but nevertheless, it's not going to be that this is going to come to an end when Ukraine is defeated. Europe and the United States, or at least Europe, will want to keep this going for who knows how long. You see, I'm a little bit more optimistic, and perhaps that's a mistake. It's always a mistake to be optimistic, but I'm a little bit optimistic here because I remember Vietnam. And Vietnam, it discredited for an extended period the whole idea of intervention, the whole idea of militarism.

It really produced dramatic changes for a few years, at least, in American politics. And the public reared its ugly head. It asserted an independent power that it hadn't done before, and that was new to people. That shocked a lot of people. And I'm hopeful that something like that will happen here, that, you know, just as the Tet Offensive kind of blew away the official explanation for what was

going on and destroyed the credibility of the whole foreign policy establishment and changed policy, eventually forced the United States to quit Vietnam and at least reduce its interventionism overseas, I'm hopeful that something like that is about to happen here. You're about to get a credibility gap of dramatic proportions, and the public of Europe will rear its ugly head and say, "Enough." But, you know, I like that.

#Pascal

I mean, that would be a hope, that it can be wound down, because, like, if it continues the way it does right now, I mean, Europe might get into much, much more trouble if they get the Russians to the point where they say, like, "Hey, why are only our cities burning with drones? I mean, if you want this war, the full-scale war, then we'll give it to you." You know that.

#David Gibbs

Nuclear war could very well be the end of this. There's definitely a risk of that. It's amazing to me that people aren't more worried about that, because that's right on the table. The United States and the Europeans have done things that were never, ever considered during the Cold War. I mean, the bomber base, the nuclear strategic bomber base, done by the Ukrainians almost certainly with U.S. and British connivance, all right, that was never attempted during the Cold War. And here it was done. And that's incredibly provocative. Kaja Kallas saying, you know, she would like to consider breaking up Russia into pieces. This is a country that has 1,500, I think maybe 1,800, actively deployed nuclear weapons. You really want to provoke a nuclear war? Because it's almost as if that's what Kaja Kallas wants. When I was in the Baltics, it almost felt like that's what people wanted.

#Pascal

This is where this stupid stereotype of the Russian actually does so much damage, of what we started off at the beginning. You know, when you are a Russophobe and you believe at the same time that they're beasts and ridiculous, then you won't take them seriously. And my wonderful example that came to my mind recently is that, like, you know, the way that Japan approaches North Korea. They call the North Korean leader crazy, but that's not an insult. That comes from a place of fear. They fear the North Koreans. And there's no phobia against the North Koreans. There's just fear. But they do not try to poke them. They do not try to say, "We need to break up North Korea. We need to invade North Korea." On the opposite, they properly fear them. And that creates a stability, actually. And the Europeans don't fear the Russians. And that's where Karaganov said, "We need to, we need to bomb them." And this then feeds into this spiral, this loop.

#David Gibbs

Well, again, going to the Baltics, one of the reasons I was eager to do that was to get a firsthand sense of what a kind of really deep irrationality looks like. And it really did look like the kind of blind

hatred, a need for revenge, a need for vendetta. And, you know, who knows where this is going to go? But as I said, I'm hopeful that the European public—not maybe in the Baltics, but elsewhere—will put their foot down and say no.

#Pascal

Your word in God's ear, my friend, because let's hope, because honestly, honestly, it must be wound down. Otherwise, it's going to get much, much worse. So, David, people want to find your work. Where should they go?

#David Gibbs

They can just Google my name, David N. Gibbs, with an N, or they can go to dgibbs.arizona.edu.

#Pascal

I will put the links to that in the description box below, and then we will talk again, hopefully relatively soon, with one more of our friends. We'll see if we can arrange that. And until then, Professor David Gibbs, thank you so much for your time today.

#David Gibbs

Thank you very much. Bye-bye.