‘Yes, He Would’: Fiona Hill on Putin and Nukes

Putin is trying to take down the entire world order, the veteran Russia watcher said in an interview. But there are ways even ordinary Americans can fight back.

Putin at his annual news conference in December 2021. | Alexander Zemlianichenko/AP Photo

By **MAURA REYNOLDS**

Maura Reynolds is a senior editor at POLITICO Magazine.

For many people, watching the Russian invasion of Ukraine has felt like a series of “He can’t be doing this” moments. Russia’s Vladimir Putin has launched the largest ground war in Europe since the Second World War. It is, quite literally, mind-boggling.

That’s why I reached out to Fiona Hill, one of America’s most clear-eyed Russia experts, someone who has studied Putin for decades, worked in both Republican and Democratic administrations and has a reputation for truth-telling, earned when she testified during impeachment hearings for her former boss, President Donald Trump.

I wanted to know what she’s been thinking as she’s watched the extraordinary footage of Russian tanks rolling across international borders, what she thinks Putin has in mind and what insights she can offer into his motivations and objectives.

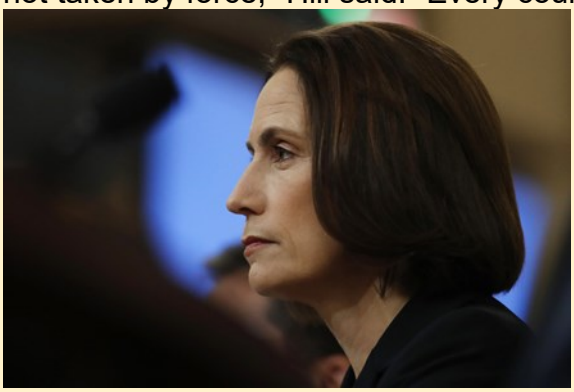
Hill spent many years studying history, and in our conversation, she repeatedly traced how long arcs and trends of European history are converging on Ukraine right now. We are already, she said, in the middle of a third World War, whether we’ve fully grasped it or not.

“Sadly, we are treading back through old historical patterns that we said that we would never permit to happen again,” Hill told me.

Those old historical patterns include Western businesses who fail to see how they help build a tyrant’s war chest, admirers enamored of an autocrat’s “strength” and politicians’ tendency to point fingers inward for political gain instead of working together for their nation’s security.

But at the same time, Hill says it’s not too late to turn Putin back, and it’s a job not just for the Ukrainians or for NATO — it’s a job that ordinary Westerners and companies can assist in important ways once they grasp what’s at stake.

“Ukraine has become the front line in a struggle, not just between democracies and autocracies but in a struggle for maintaining a rules-based system in which the things that countries want are not taken by force,” Hill said. “Every country in the world should be paying close attention to this.”



Fiona Hill testifying in an impeachment hearing of Donald Trump. | Alex Brandon/AP Photo

There’s lots of danger ahead, she warned. Putin is increasingly operating emotionally and likely to use all the weapons at his disposal, including nuclear ones. It’s important not to have any illusions — but equally important not to lose hope.

“Every time you think, ’No, he wouldn’t, would he?’ Well, yes, he would,” Hill said. “And he wants us to know that, of course. It’s not that we should be intimidated and scared…. We have to prepare for those contingencies and figure out what is it that we’re going to do to head them off.”

The following transcript has been edited for length and clarity.

Maura Reynolds: You’ve been a Putin watcher for a long time, and you’ve written one of the best biographies of Putin. When you’ve been watching him over the past week, what have you been seeing that other people might be missing?

Fiona Hill: Putin is usually more cynical and calculated than he came across in his most recent speeches. There’s evident visceral emotion in things that he said in the past few weeks justifying the war in Ukraine. The pretext is completely flimsy and almost nonsensical for anybody who’s not in the echo chamber or the bubble of propaganda in Russia itself. I mean, demanding to the

Ukrainian military that they essentially overthrow their own government or lay down their arms and surrender because they are being commanded by a bunch of drug-addled Nazi fascists? There's just no sense to that. It beggars the imagination.

"Every time you think, 'No, he wouldn't, would he?' Well, yes, he would. And he wants us to know that, of course." *Fiona Hill*

Putin doesn't even seem like he's trying to make a convincing case. We saw the same thing in the Russian response at the United Nations. The justification has essentially been "what-about-ism": 'You guys have been invading Iraq, Afghanistan. Don't tell me that I can't do the same thing in Ukraine."

This visceral emotion is unhealthy and extraordinarily dangerous because there are few checks and balances around Putin. He spotlighted this during the performance of the National Security Council meeting, where it became very clear that this was his decision. He was in a way taking full responsibility for war, and even the heads of his security and intelligence services looked like they've been thrown off guard by how fast things were moving.

Reynolds: So Putin is being driven by emotion right now, not by some kind of logical plan?

Hill: I think there's been a logical, methodical plan that goes back a very long way, at least to 2007 when he put the world, and certainly Europe, on notice that Moscow would not accept the further expansion of NATO. And then within a year in 2008 NATO gave an open door to Georgia and Ukraine. It absolutely goes back to that juncture.

Back then I was a national intelligence officer, and the National Intelligence Council was analyzing what Russia was likely to do in response to the NATO Open Door declaration. One of our assessments was that there was a real, genuine risk of some kind of preemptive Russian military action, not just confined to the annexation of Crimea, but some much larger action taken against Ukraine along with Georgia. And of course, four months after NATO's Bucharest Summit, there was the invasion of Georgia. There wasn't an invasion of Ukraine then because the Ukrainian government pulled back from seeking NATO membership. But we should have seriously addressed how we were going to deal with this potential outcome and our relations with Russia.

Reynolds: Do you think Putin's current goal is reconstituting the Soviet Union, the Russian Empire, or something different?

Hill: It's reestablishing Russian dominance of what Russia sees as the Russian "Imperium." I'm saying this very specifically because the lands of the Soviet Union didn't cover all of the territories that were once part of the Russian Empire. So that should give us pause.

Putin has articulated an idea of there being a "Russky Mir" or a "Russian World." The recent essay he published about Ukraine and Russia states the Ukrainian and Russian people are "one people," a "yedinyi narod." He's saying Ukrainians and Russians are one and the same. This idea of a Russian World means re-gathering all the Russian-speakers in different places that belonged at some point to the Russian tsardom.

A map of the Russian Empire in 1730. | Philipp Johann Strahlenberg/Wikimedia Commons

I've kind of quipped about this but I also worry about it in all seriousness — that Putin's been down in the archives of the Kremlin during Covid looking through old maps and treaties and all the different borders that Russia has had over the centuries. He's said, repeatedly, that Russian and European borders have changed many times. And in his speeches, he's gone after various former Russian and Soviet leaders, he's gone after Lenin and he's gone after the communists, because in his view they ruptured the Russian empire, they lost Russian lands in the revolution, and yes, Stalin brought some of them back into the fold again like the Baltic States and some of the lands of Ukraine that had been divided up during World War II, but they were lost again with the dissolution of the USSR. Putin's view is that borders change, and so the borders of the old Russian imperium are still in play for Moscow to dominate now.

Reynolds: Dominance in what way?

Hill: It doesn't mean that he's going to annex all of them and make them part of the Russian Federation like they've done with Crimea. You can establish dominance by marginalizing regional countries, by making sure that their leaders are completely dependent on Moscow, either by Moscow practically appointing them through rigged elections or ensuring they are tethered to Russian economic and political and security networks. You can see this now across the former Soviet space.

We've seen pressure being put on Kazakhstan to reorient itself back toward Russia, instead of balancing between Russia and China, and the West. And just a couple of days before the invasion of Ukraine in a little-noticed act, Azerbaijan signed a bilateral military agreement with Russia. This is significant because Azerbaijan's leader has been resisting this for decades. And we can also see that Russia has made itself the final arbiter of the future relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Georgia has also been marginalized after being a thorn in Russia's side for decades. And Belarus is now completely subjugated by Moscow.

But amid all this, Ukraine was the country that got away. And what Putin is saying now is that Ukraine doesn't belong to Ukrainians. It belongs to him and the past. He is going to wipe Ukraine off the map, literally, because it doesn't belong on his map of the "Russian world." He's basically told us that. He might leave behind some rump statelets. When we look at old maps of Europe — probably the maps he's been looking at — you find all kinds of strange entities, like the Sanjak of Novi Pazar in the Balkans. I used to think, what the hell is that? These are all little places that have dependency on a bigger power and were created to prevent the formation of larger viable states in contested regions. Basically, if Vladimir Putin has his way, Ukraine is not going to exist as the modern-day Ukraine of the last 30 years. ab

Reynolds: How far into Ukraine do you think Putin is going to go?

Hill: At this juncture, if he can, he's going to go all the way. Before this last week, he had multiple different options to choose from. He'd given himself the option of being able to go in in full force as he's doing now, but he could also have focused on retaking the rest of the administrative territories of Donetsk and Luhansk. He could have seized the Sea of Azov, which he's probably going to do anyway, and then joined up the Donetsk and Luhansk regions with Crimea as well as the lands in between and all the way down to Odessa. In fact, Putin initially tried this in 2014 — to create "Novorossiya," or "New Russia," but that failed when local support for joining Russia didn't materialize.

Now, if he can, he is going to take the whole country. We have to face up to this fact. Although we haven't seen the full Russian invasion force deployed yet, he's certainly got the troops to move into the whole country.

Reynolds: You say he has an adequate number of troops to move in, but does he have enough to occupy the whole country?

Hill: If there is serious resistance, he may not have sufficient force to take the country for a protracted period. It also may be that he doesn't want to occupy the whole country, that he wants to break it up, maybe annex some parts of it, maybe leave some of it as rump statelets or a larger rump Ukraine somewhere, maybe around Lviv. I'm not saying that I know exactly what's going on in his head. And he may even suggest other parts of Ukraine get absorbed by adjacent countries. In 2015, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was at the Munich Security Conference after the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. And he talked about Ukraine not being a country, saying pointedly that there are many minority groups in Ukraine — there are Poles and there are

Romanians, there are Hungarians and Russians. And he goes on essentially almost inviting the rest of Europe to divide Ukraine up.
So what Putin wants isn't necessarily to occupy the whole country, but really to divide it up. He's looked at Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and other places where there's a division of the country between the officially sanctioned forces on the one hand, and the rebel forces on the other. That's something that Putin could definitely live with — a fractured, shattered Ukraine with different bits being in different statuses.
Reynolds: So step by step, in ways that we haven't always appreciated in the West, Putin has brought back a lot of these countries that were independent after the Soviet collapse back under his umbrella. The only country that has so far evaded Putin's grip has been Ukraine.
Hill: Ukraine, correct. Because it's bigger and because of its strategic location. That's what Russia wants to ensure, or Putin wants to ensure, that Ukraine like the other countries, has no other option than subjugation to Russia.
Reynolds: How much of what we're seeing now is tied to Putin's own electoral schedule? He seized Crimea in 2014, and that helped to boost his ratings and ensure his future reelection. He's got another election coming up in 2024. Is any of this tied to that?
Hill: I think it is. In 2020, Putin had the Russian Constitution amended so that he could stay on until 2036, another set of two six-year terms. He's going to be 84 then. But in 2024, he has to re-legitimate himself by standing for election. The only real contender might have been Alexei Navalny, and they've put him in a penal colony. Putin has rolled up all the potential opposition and resistance, so one would think it would be a cakewalk for him in 2024. But the way it works with Russian elections, he actually has to put on a convincing show that demonstrates that he's immensely popular and he's got the affirmation of all the population.
Behind the scenes it's fairly clear that there's a lot of apathy in the system, that many people support Putin because there's no one else. People who don't support him at all will probably not turn out to vote. The last time that his brand got stale, it was before the annexation of Crimea. That put him back on the top of the charts in terms of his ratings.
It may not just be the presidential calendar, the electoral calendar. He's going to be 70 in October. And 70 you know, in the larger scheme of things, is not that old. There are plenty of politicians out there that are way over 70.
Reynolds: But it's old for Russians.
Hill: It's old for Russians. And Putin's not looking so great, he's been rather puffy-faced. We know that he has complained about having back issues. Even if it's not something worse than that, it could be that he's taking high doses of steroids, or there may be something else. There seems to be an urgency for this that may be also driven by personal factors.
He may have a sense that time is marching on — it's 22 years, after all, and the likelihood after that kind of time of a Russian leader leaving voluntarily or through elections is pretty slim. Most leaders leave either like Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko thought that he might leave, as the result of massive protests, or they die in office.
The only other person who has been Russian leader in modern times longer than Putin is Stalin, and Stalin died in office.
Reynolds: Putin came to power after a series of operations that many have seen as a kind of false flag — bombings of buildings around Russia that killed Russian citizens, hundreds of them, followed by a war in Chechnya. That led to Putin coming to power as a wartime president. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 also came at a difficult time for Putin. Now we're seeing another big military operation less than two years before he needs to stand for election again. Am I wrong to see that pattern?
Hill: No, I don't think you are. There's definitely a pattern here. Part of Putin's persona as president is that he is a ruthless tough guy, the strong man who is the champion and protector of Russia. And that's why Russia needs him. If all was peaceful and quiet, why would you need Vladimir Putin? If you think of other wartime leaders — Winston Churchill comes to mind — in peacetime, Winston Churchill got voted out of office.
Reynolds: Speaking of Chechnya, I have been thinking that this is the largest ground military operation that Russia has fought since Chechnya. What did we learn about the Russian military then that's relevant now?

Hill: It's very important, that you bring this point up because people are saying Ukraine is the largest military operation in Europe since World War II. The first largest military action in Europe since World War II was actually in Chechnya, because Chechnya is part of Russia. This was a devastating conflict that dragged on for years, with two rounds of war after a brief truce, and tens of thousands of military and civilian casualties. The regional capital of Grozny was leveled. The casualties were predominantly ethnic Russians and Russian speakers. The Chechens fought back, and this became a military debacle on Russia's own soil. Analysts called it "the nadir of the Russian army." After NATO's intervention in the Balkan wars in the same timeframe in the 1990s, Moscow even worried that NATO might intervene.

Reynolds: What have we learned about NATO in the last two months?

Hill: In many respects, not good things, initially. Although now we see a significant rallying of the political and diplomatic forces, serious consultations and a spur to action in response to bolster NATO's military defenses.

But we also need to think about it this way. We have had a long-term policy failure going back to the end of the Cold War in terms of thinking about how to manage NATO's relations with Russia to minimize risk. NATO is a like a massive insurer, a protector of national security for Europe and the United States. After the end of the Cold War, we still thought that we had the best insurance for the hazards we could face — flood, fire etc. — but for a discounted premium. We didn't take adequate steps to address and reduce the various risks. We can now see that that we didn't do our due diligence and fully consider all the possible contingencies, including how we would mitigate Russia's negative response to successive expansions. Think about Swiss Re or AIG or Lloyds of London — when the hazard was massive, like during Hurricane Katrina or the global financial crisis in 2008, those insurance companies got into major trouble. They and their clients found themselves underwater. And this is kind of what NATO members are learning now.

Reynolds: And then there's the nuclear element. Many people have thought that we'd never see a large ground war in Europe or a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia, because it could quickly escalate into a nuclear conflict. How close are we getting to that?

Hill: Well, we're right there. Basically, what President Putin has said quite explicitly in recent days is that if anybody interferes in Ukraine, they will be met with a response that they've "never had in [their] history." And he has put Russia's nuclear forces on high alert. So he's making it very clear that nuclear is on the table.

Putin tried to warn Trump about this, but I don't think Trump figured out what he was saying. In one of the last meetings between Putin and Trump when I was there, Putin was making the point that: "Well you know, Donald, we have these hypersonic missiles." And Trump was saying, "Well, we will get them too." Putin was saying, "Well, yes, you will get them *eventually*, but we've got them first." There was a menace in this exchange. Putin was putting us on notice that if push came to shove in some confrontational environment that the nuclear option would be on the table.

Reynolds: Do you really think he'll use a nuclear weapon?

Hill: The thing about Putin is, if he has an instrument, he wants to use it. Why have it if you can't? He's already used a nuclear weapon in some respects. Russian operatives poisoned Alexander Litvinenko with radioactive polonium and turned him into a human dirty bomb and polonium was spread all around London at every spot that poor man visited. He died a horrible death as a result. The Russians have already used a weapons-grade nerve agent, Novichok. They've used it possibly several times, but for certain twice. Once in Salisbury, England, where it was rubbed all over the doorknob of Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia, who actually didn't die; but the nerve agent contaminated the city of Salisbury, and anybody else who came into contact with it got sickened. Novichok killed a British citizen, Dawn Sturgess, because the assassins stored it in a perfume bottle which was discarded into a charity donation box where it was found by Sturgess and her partner. There was enough nerve agent in that bottle to kill several thousand people. The second time was in Alexander Navalny's underpants.

So if anybody thinks that Putin wouldn't use something that he's got that is unusual and cruel, think again. Every time you think, "No, he wouldn't, would he?" Well, yes, he would. And he wants us to know that, of course.

It's not that we should be intimidated and scared. That's exactly what he wants us to be. We have to prepare for those contingencies and figure out what is it that we're going to do to head them off.

Reynolds: So how do we deal with it? Are sanctions enough?
Hill: Well, we can't just deal with it as the United States on our own. First of all, this has to be an international response.
Reynolds: Larger than NATO?
Hill: It has to be larger than NATO. Now I'm not saying that that means an international military response that's larger than NATO, but the push back has to be international.
We first have to think about what Vladimir Putin has done and the nature of what we're facing. People don't want to talk about Adolf Hitler and World War II, but I'm going to talk about it. Obviously the major element when you talk about World War II, which is overwhelming, is the Holocaust and the absolute decimation of the Jewish population of Europe, as well as the Roma-Sinti people.
But let's focus here on the territorial expansionism of Germany, what Germany did under Hitler in that period: seizure of the Sudetenland and the Anschluss or annexation of Austria, all on the basis that they were German speakers. The invasion of Poland. The treaty with the Soviet Union, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, that also enabled the Soviet Union to take portions of Poland but then became a prelude to Operation Barbarossa, the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Invasions of France and all of the countries surrounding Germany, including Denmark and further afield to Norway. Germany eventually engaged in a burst of massive territorial expansion and occupation. Eventually the Soviet Union fought back. Vladimir Putin's own family suffered during the siege of Leningrad, and yet here is Vladimir Putin doing exactly the same thing.
Reynolds: So, similar to Hitler, he's using a sense of massive historical grievance combined with a veneer of protecting Russians and a dismissal of the rights of minorities and other nations to have independent countries in order to fuel territorial ambitions?
Hill: Correct. And he's blaming others, for why this has happened, and getting us to blame ourselves.
If people look back to the history of World War II, there were an awful lot of people around Europe who became Nazi German sympathizers before the invasion of Poland. In the United Kingdom, there was a whole host of British politicians who admired Hitler's strength and his power, for doing what Great Powers do, before the horrors of the Blitz and the Holocaust finally penetrated.
Reynolds: And you see this now.
Hill: You totally see it. Unfortunately, we have politicians and public figures in the United States and around Europe who have embraced the idea that Russia was wronged by NATO and that Putin is a strong, powerful man and has the right to do what he's doing: Because Ukraine is somehow not worthy of independence, because it's either Russia's historical lands or Ukrainians are Russians, or the Ukrainian leaders are — this is what Putin says — "drug addled, fascist Nazis" or whatever labels he wants to apply here.
So sadly, we are treading back through old historical patterns that we said that we would never permit to happen again. The other thing to think about in this larger historic context is how much the German business community helped facilitate the rise of Hitler. Right now, everyone who has been doing business in Russia or buying Russian gas and oil has contributed to Putin's war chest. Our investments are not just boosting business profits, or Russia's sovereign wealth funds and its longer-term development. They now are literally the fuel for Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Just like people didn't want their money invested in South Africa during apartheid, do you really want to have your money invested in Russia during Russia's brutal invasion and subjugation and carving up of Ukraine?

Fiona Hill

Reynolds: I gather you think that sanctions leveled by the government are inadequate to address this much larger threat?
Hill: Absolutely. Sanctions are not going to be enough. You need to have a major international response, where governments decide on their own accord that they can't do business with Russia for a period of time until this is resolved. We need a temporary suspension of business activity with Russia. Just as we wouldn't be having a full-blown diplomatic negotiation for anything but a ceasefire and withdrawal while Ukraine is still being actively invaded, so it's the same thing with business. Right now you're fueling the invasion of Ukraine. So what we need is a suspension of business activity with Russia until Moscow ceases hostilities and withdraws its troops.

Reynolds: So ordinary companies…
Hill: Ordinary companies should make a decision. This is the epitome of "ESG" that companies are saying is their priority right now — upholding standards of good Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance. Just like people didn't want their money invested in South Africa during apartheid, do you really want to have your money invested in Russia during Russia's brutal invasion and subjugation and carving up of Ukraine?
If Western companies, their pension plans or mutual funds, are invested in Russia they should pull out. Any people who are sitting on the boards of major Russian companies should resign immediately. Not every Russian company is tied to the Kremlin, but many major Russian companies absolutely are, and everyone knows it. If we look back to Germany in the runup to the Second World War, it was the major German enterprises that were being used in support of the war. And we're seeing exactly the same thing now. Russia would not be able to afford this war were it not for the fact that oil and gas prices are ratcheting up. They've got enough in the war chest for now. But over the longer term, this will not be sustainable without the investment that comes into Russia and all of the Russian commodities, not just oil and gas, that are being purchased on world markets. And, our international allies, like Saudi Arabia, should be increasing oil production right now as a temporary offset. Right now, they are also indirectly funding war in Ukraine by keeping oil prices high.
This has to be an international response to push Russia to stop its military action. India abstained in the United Nations, and you can see that other countries are feeling discomforted and hoping this might go away. This is not going to go away, and it could be "you next" — because Putin is setting a precedent for countries to return to the type of behavior that sparked the two great wars which were a free-for-all over territory. Putin is saying, "Throughout history borders have changed. Who cares?"
Reynolds: And you do not think he will necessarily stop at Ukraine?
Hill: Of course he won't. Ukraine has become the front line in a struggle, not just for which countries can or cannot be in NATO, or between democracies and autocracies, but in a struggle for maintaining a rules-based system in which the things that countries want are not taken by force. Every country in the world should be paying close attention to this. Yes, there may be countries like China and others who might think that this is permissible, but overall, most countries have benefited from the current international system in terms of trade and economic growth, from investment and an interdependent globalized world. This is pretty much the end of this. That's what Russia has done.
Reynolds: He's blown up the rules-based international order.
Hill: Exactly. What stops a lot of people from pulling out of Russia even temporarily is, they will say, "Well, the Chinese will just step in." This is what every investor always tells me. "If I get out, someone else will move in." I'm not sure that Russian businesspeople want to wake up one morning and find out the only investors in the Russian economy are Chinese, because then Russia becomes the periphery of China, the Chinese hinterlands, and not another great power that's operating in tandem with China.
Reynolds: The more we talk, the more we're using World War II analogies. There are people who are saying we're on the brink of a World War III.
Hill: We're already in it. We have been for some time. We keep thinking of World War I, World War II as these huge great big set pieces, but World War II was a consequence of World War I. And we had an interwar period between them. And in a way, we had that again after the Cold War. Many of the things that we're talking about here have their roots in the carving up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire at the end of World War I. At the end of World War II, we had another reconfiguration and some of the issues that we have been dealing with recently go back to that immediate post-war period. We've had war in Syria, which is in part the consequence of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, same with Iraq and Kuwait.
All of the conflicts that we're seeing have roots in those earlier conflicts. We are already in a hot war over Ukraine, which started in 2014. People shouldn't delude themselves into thinking that we're just on the brink of something. We've been well and truly in it for quite a long period of time. But this is also a full-spectrum information war, and what happens in a Russian "all-of-society" war, you soften up the enemy. You get the Tucker Carlsons and Donald Trumps doing your job for

you. The fact that Putin managed to persuade Trump that Ukraine belongs to Russia, and that Trump would be willing to give up Ukraine without any kind of fight, that's a major success for Putin's information war. I mean he has got swathes of the Republican Party — and not just them, some on the left, as well as on the right — masses of the U.S. public saying, "Good on you, Vladimir Putin," or blaming NATO, or blaming the U.S. for this outcome. This is exactly what a Russian information war and psychological operation is geared towards. He's been carefully seeding this terrain as well. We've been at war, for a very long time. I've been saying this for years.

Reynolds: So just as the world didn't see Hitler coming, we failed to see Putin coming?

Hill: We shouldn't have. He's been around for 22 years now, and he has been coming to this point since 2008. I don't think that he initially set off to do all of this, by the way, but the attitudes towards Ukraine and the feelings that all Ukraine belongs to Russia, the feelings of loss, they've all been there and building up.

What Russia is doing is asserting that "might makes right." Of course, yes, we've also made terrible mistakes. But no one ever has the right to completely destroy another country — Putin's opened up a door in Europe that we thought we'd closed after World War II.