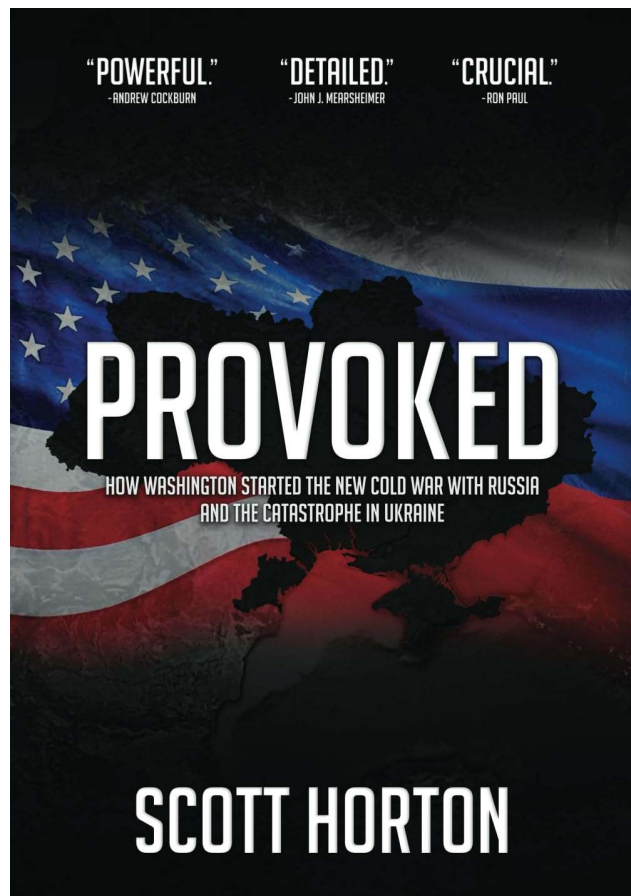


## ‘Provoked’ a fascinating read for those into politics

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*“Provoked: How Washington Started the New Cold War with Russia and the Catastrophe in Ukraine” by Scott Horton. Austin, TX: The Libertarian Institute, 2024, 690 pages, \$29.99 (paperback).*



“The Soviets allowed reunification {of Germany} because the Allies had promised they would not expand NATO eastward, inside Germany or beyond,” Scott Horton explains near the beginning of “Provoked: How Washington Started the New Cold War with Russia and the Catastrophe in Ukraine,” his recently released diatribe on how the West, and especially the United States, precipitated the current situation in Ukraine. “Of course, the various administrations and their partisans have lied about it since, at times claiming this pledge either never happened, or that it only ever applied to NATO forces within Germany, but not the rest of Eastern Europe.”

“One may object that the deals were struck with the USSR, not post-Soviet Russia, and argue that countries which were still Soviet republics or in the Warsaw Pact could not have been up for consideration anyway, but that is incorrect,” Horton continues a little later in the inaugural chapter. “As shown above, nations such as Poland and Hungary were brought up by name in the Promises on NATO expansion in early 1990, along with more general references to Eastern Europe,

while the Warsaw Pact was not dissolved until March 1991.”

So begins an intriguing and exceptionally in-depth foray into how we arrived at the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. As indicated by the extensive footnotes that populate virtually every page of this exhaustive treatment of the subject matter at hand, the author is obviously well-versed in the nuances of the thesis he is vociferously promoting. Every statement made is scrupulously referenced and thoroughly documented. At the same time, as I read further into the assertions being made, I was reminded again and again of the famous line by Queen Gertrude in Hamlet, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.” Horton is working very hard to lay the blame for Russia’s expansionist tendencies on the American doorstep.

Structurally, the book consists of eight chapters, following the chronological progression from President George H.W. Bush through President Joe Biden, with a passing reference to the second term of President Donald Trump, which became a reality as “Provoked” was being published. He is convinced, and he wants you to be, that each succeeding Administration beginning with George H.W. Bush, contributed to Ukraine’s present disaster. To be sure, some of what Horton describes was unintentional, but very little was done when these errors in judgment were pointed out. He ends the book with “Good Night and Good Luck,” a brief epilogue that serves as a fitting capstone to this political sermon.

Probably best known as host of the Scott Horton Show podcast, Horton is also director of The Libertarian Institute as well as editorial director of Antiwar, an online publication. His previous books include “Enough Already: Time to End the War on Terrorism,” in 2021, and “Fool’s Errand: Time to End the War in Afghanistan,” in 2017.

Most students of history will find this volume difficult to put down. You learn something new about things you thought you knew intimately on every page. The more casual reader, however, will find it challenging to make it all the way through this one. Although illuminating, Horton’s rather scholarly approach can be tedious and the constant citations constitute a huge distraction. Moreover, the narrative alternates between formal, intellectual discourse that sounds objective and vernacular prose more befitting a social media post.

Still, I did find several passages to be extraordinarily cogent. For example, consider the following from the chapter on Donald Trump’s first term:

“Though the government and establishment media constantly abuse the term “conspiracy theorist” to mean anyone who does not believe their own conspiracy theories on any given subject, there truly is such a thing as classic, circular logic-driven, conclusion-jumping narratives that people accept despite all evidence to the contrary – and the type of nut who believes in them. Recent examples from pop culture include the belief among some groups that nuclear weapons do not really exist, that JFK Jr. is still alive, and that the Earth is actually flat.”

And some, I suppose, will put “Provoked” into this category.

The duplicity Horton goes to such lengths to expose is reinforced by Michaelangelo Carus in his compelling critique of “Provoked” on Miles Wire, an online publication maintained by The Mises Institute, a non-profit organization that exists to promote teaching and research in the Austrian School of economics:

“From George H.W. Bush to today, the record meticulously compiled by Horton demonstrates that U.S. and other Western leaders communicated to Russian leaders and officials that NATO would not expand east—and could even allow for Russian membership in NATO. Various efforts like the Partnership for Peace and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe were promoted to foster this impression that Russia would be included in European affairs, alliances, and institutions, rather than these structures aligning against them. All the while, these same U.S. and Western leaders took virtually the opposite positions internally, with the result that the U.S. willfully misled the Russians. The exact internal and external postures waxed and waned over the years, but this ultimate pattern held firm. This was even though, all along, Russian officials warned about how they and the Russian people would react to NATO advancing east. What we see is, in terms with which Americans are well-familiar, ‘a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object.’”

Ultimately, I found “Provoked” to be provocative and even somewhat seductive given the painstakingly detailed way Horton lays out his case. I still believe he goes over the top with the dismissive attitude he projects toward anyone who might not be buying his primary thesis – but then again, we all tend to do that from time to time. I’m not recommending this one highly, but anyone who has an innate interest in history, politics, and alternative explanations will find Horton’s latest manuscript to be a fascinating read.

So pick up a copy if you’re headed to the beach for a couple of months and need something to read that will impress passersby.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, WKU.*