

# The Illusory Truth Effect And The "Unprovoked" Invasion Of Ukraine



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## Illusory truth effect

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The **illusory truth effect** (also known as the **illusion of truth effect**, **validity effect**, **truth effect**, or the **reiteration effect**) is the tendency to believe **false information** to be correct after repeated exposure.<sup>[1]</sup> This phenomenon was first identified in a 1977 study at [Villanova University](#) and [Temple University](#).<sup>[2][3]</sup> When **truth** is assessed, people rely on whether the information is in line with their understanding or if it feels familiar. The first condition is logical, as people compare new information with what they already know to be true. Repetition makes statements easier to process relative to new, unrepeated statements, leading people to believe that the repeated conclusion is more truthful. The illusory truth effect has also been linked to [hindsight bias](#), in which the recollection of confidence is skewed after the truth has been received.

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Caitlin Johnstone

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Arguably the single most egregious display of war propaganda in the 21st century occurred last year, when the entire western political/media class began uniformly bleating the word "unprovoked" in reference to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

On February 23 of last year, the day before the invasion began, the New York Times editorial board [wrote](#) that “an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign European state is an unprovoked declaration of war on a scale, on a continent and in a century when it was thought to be no longer possible.”

After the war began, the Biden White House released a statement titled “[Remarks by President Biden on Russia’s Unprovoked and Unjustified Attack on Ukraine](#).” Secretary of State Antony Blinken [shared](#) Biden’s statement on Twitter with the comment “Russia’s premeditated, unprovoked, and unjustified attack on Ukraine blatantly disregards the lives of innocent men, women, and children, Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and international law.”



<https://twitter.com/SecBlinken/status/1497005559475810304>

In early March of last year, the New York Times editorial board [wrote](#) that western sanctions against Russia in retaliation for the invasion “have demonstrated that there are consequences for unprovoked wars of aggression.”

In April of last year the New York Times editorial board again repeated this slogan, [writing](#) that Putin had “ordered an unprovoked war to satisfy his ambitions of empire and the destruction of a neighboring nation.”

In May of last year the New York Times editorial board [reiterated](#) that “Ukraine deserves support against Russia’s unprovoked aggression.”

[According to](#) analyst Jeffrey Sachs, the New York Times used the word unprovoked “no fewer than 26 times, in five editorials, 14 opinion columns by NYT writers, and seven guest op-eds.”



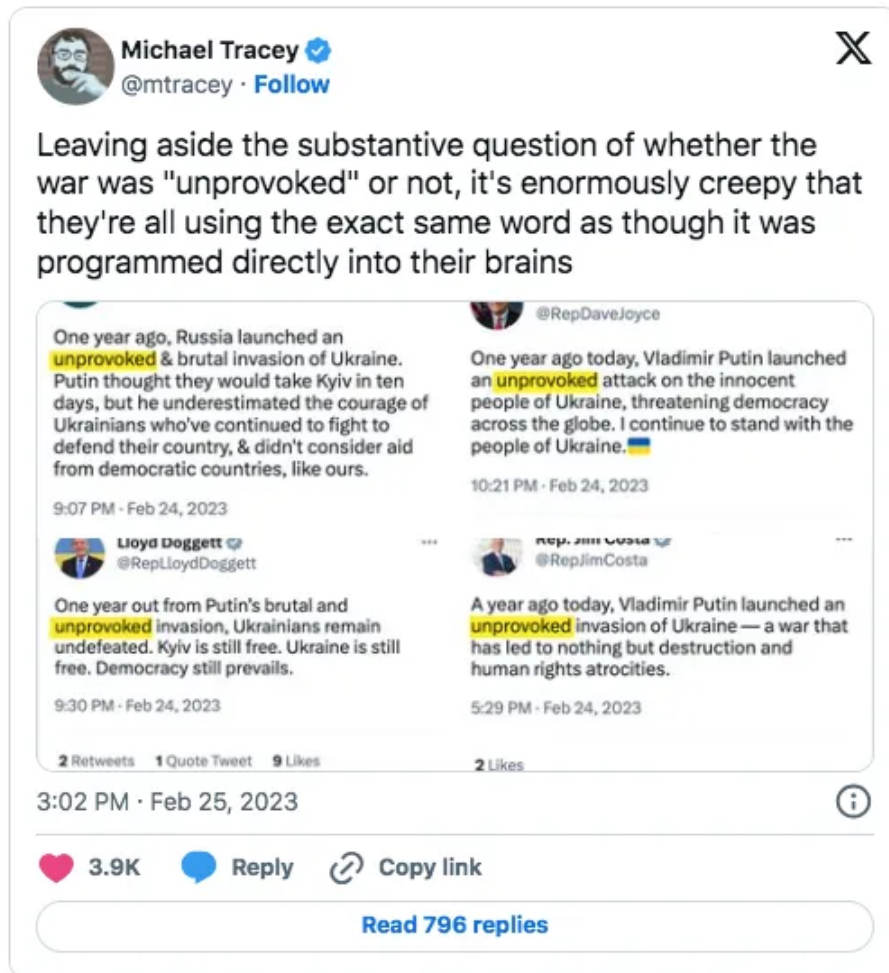
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But it wasn't just the Paper of Record singing from the same hymnal as the US government on Ukraine. The Guardian editorial board [wrote](#) that “Mr Putin’s unprovoked war against a smaller, democratic neighbour has resulted in 1.7 million people fleeing their homes.” The LA Times editorial board [wrote](#) that the “most conspicuous victims of Russia’s unprovoked invasion of Ukraine are the people who will lose their lives in defending their country against a brutal (and nuclear-armed) neighbor.” The Chicago Tribune editorial board [made reference to](#) “Putin’s audacious, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine.” The Financial Times editorial board [made reference](#)

[to](#) "Putin's unprovoked assault on Russia's neighbour." The Washington Post editorial board [made reference to](#) "Moscow's disastrous, unprovoked invasion" [and to](#) "Russia's unprovoked invasion" in two separate pieces.

Everywhere you looked, that word was being uncritically regurgitated by the western press. CNN [saying](#) "Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine has devastated the country, killing hundreds of civilians, sparking a humanitarian disaster and resulting in a wave of sanctions from the West." Time [babbling about](#) "Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24." The New Yorker [saying](#) "Vladimir Putin ordered Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine." NBC News [saying](#) "Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine began Thursday, after weeks of buildup." CNBC [talking about](#) "Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine."

This is just me citing a few of the basically limitless examples I can point to of this war sloganeering throughout the mass media. The western press uphold themselves as impartial arbiters of truth, purporting to be superior to the state media propagandists of nations like Russia and China, and claiming a legitimacy that ordinary people using social media don't have. And yet here they are uncritically parroting the talking points of the US government and taking sides against Russia.



<https://twitter.com/mtracey/status/1629330868102676482>

The western media claim to report the facts, but the way they've fallen in line behind the "unprovoked" narrative reveals that their actual job is to frame world events in a way that serves the information interests of their government. Which would be bad enough if that narrative was just a biased framing of a contentious issue, and not the bald-faced lie that it actually is.

During an [interview last year](#) with the Useful Idiots podcast, Noam Chomsky argued that the reason we keep hearing the western press using the word "unprovoked" in reference to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is because it absolutely was provoked, and they know it.

"Right now if you're a respectable writer and you want to write in the main journals, you talk about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, you have to call it 'the *unprovoked* Russian invasion of Ukraine,' Chomsky [said](#). "It's a very interesting phrase; it was never used before. You look back, you look at Iraq, which was totally unprovoked, nobody ever called it 'the unprovoked invasion of Iraq.' In fact I don't know if the term was ever used — if it was it was very marginal. Now you look it up on Google, and hundreds of thousands of hits. Every article that comes out has to talk about the unprovoked invasion of Ukraine."



"Why? Because they know perfectly well it was provoked," Chomsky said. "That doesn't justify it, but it was massively provoked."

Indeed, you can disagree with Russia's invasion or believe that Putin overreacted to the situation, but what you can't do is legitimately claim that the invasion was unprovoked. It's just a [well-documented](#) fact that the US and its allies [provoked this war](#) in a [whole host of ways](#), from NATO expansion to backing regime change in Kyiv to playing along with aggressions against Donbass separatists to pouring weapons into Ukraine. There's also an [abundance of evidence](#) that the US and its allies sabotaged a peace deal between Russia and Ukraine in the early weeks of the war in order to keep this conflict going as long as possible to hurt Russian interests.




<https://twitter.com/ricwe123/status/1660987213880885251>

We know that western actions provoked the war in Ukraine because [many western foreign policy experts](#) spent years warning that western actions would provoke a war in Ukraine. There's [footage of John Mearsheimer](#) back in 2015 urgently warning that "the west is leading Ukraine


down the primrose path, and the end result is that Ukraine is going to get wrecked." And that's exactly how it played out.

The reason foreign policy "realists" like Mearsheimer were able to correctly predict the war in Ukraine is because they held at the forefront of their analysis the fact that great powers will never accept threats from other great powers on their borders. This is a key point to understanding the major conflicts of the 2020s, not just between the US and Russia but between the US and China as well – and the US is the one amassing the threats on the borders of its enemies [in both instances](#).

"The thesis of the war being unprovoked is very strategic," foreign policy analyst Max Abrams recently [tweeted](#) in response to my commentary on this subject. "It whitewashes the role of NATO expansion, meddling in the Maidan uprisings and siding with far right extremists in the civil war. Not only does it exonerate America but it helps vilify Russia and sell the war as wholly good."

 **Max Abrahms**  [@MaxAbrahms](#) · [Follow](#)

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 **Caitlin Johnstone**  [@caitoz](#)

Perhaps the single most glaring example of mass media propaganda in the 21st century occurred last year when all western media outlets instantly began uniformly publishing the phrase "unprovoked invasion" over and over again as soon as the war in Ukraine began.

**The New York Times**

The magnitude of the Russian gambit is staggering. Whatever Mr. Putin's ideas on how Ukraine should relate to Russia, whatever his grievances over Western encroachment on what he perceives as Russia's sphere of influence, whatever his views on Russia's place in Europe and the world, an unprovoked invasion of a sovereign European state is an unprovoked declaration of war on a scale, on a continent and in a century when it was thought to be no longer possible.

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Apr 11 1, 2022, 9:27 AM AEST  
By Sébastien Roblin

Russia's awful military performance in Ukraine has been the greatest surprise to emerge from President Vladimir Putin's unprovoked invasion, confounding military analysts who had observed tactical and technological improvements in the

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Ever since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his brutal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, the Chinese government has attempted to portray itself as a neutral player or even a potential key to solving the crisis. In reality, Chinese President Xi Jinping is acting as Putin's co-conspirator. Make no mistake, China has made its choice — and it's not siding with Ukraine or the West.

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**Washington (CNN)** — US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Tuesday said there will be an independent Ukraine "a lot longer than there's going to be a Vladimir Putin," as the Russian leader continues his unprovoked invasion of the country.

"One way or the other, Ukraine will be there and at some point Putin won't," Blinken told CNN's Wolf Blitzer on "The Situation Room."

12:30 PM · Aug 8, 2023

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The reason the mass media have been bleating the word "unprovoked" in unison with regard to this war is because the mass media [are propaganda organs](#) of the US empire. Their repetition of this war propaganda slogan exploits a glitch in human cognition known as [the illusory truth effect](#), which makes it difficult for our minds to tell the difference between the experience of hearing something many times and the experience of hearing something that's true. Just repeatedly inserting the word "unprovoked" into Ukraine war commentary across the board causes people to assume it must have been launched without provocation, because the illusory truth effect can circumvent reason and logic to insert a narrative into the collective consciousness of our civilization.



The fact that all mass media outlets began doing this in unison, against all journalistic training and ethics, shows you just how united the mass media are in service of the US empire. When the need to push a narrative is particularly urgent, the facade of journalistic impartiality and independence drops away, and we see the true face of the most sophisticated propaganda machine that has ever existed.

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